

THE 3RD ALTERNATIVE



INTERVIEWS

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John Aegard

Nat Coward

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EXTRAORDINARY NEW STORIES

PLUS

New column: John Paul Catton in Japan

Gary Couzens on the films of Peter Weir

Christopher Fowler on peculiar English films

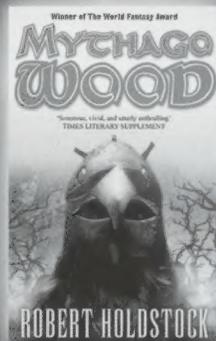
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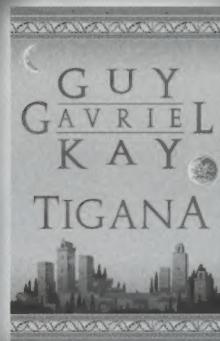


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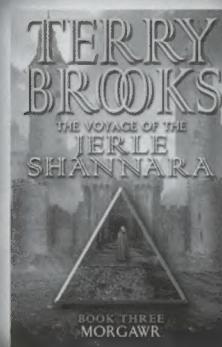
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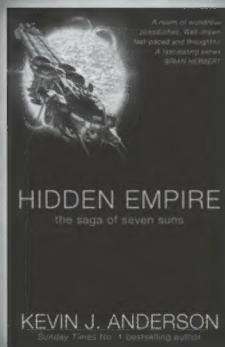
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FEAR OF FICTION: CAMPBELL'S WORLD AND OTHER OBSOLETE PARADIGMS

Claude Lalumière

The 'golden age' of Campbellian science fiction is one of the worst things that ever happened to the genre. It's right up there with *Star Trek* and *Star Wars* as a cataclysm, its aftereffects still causing pervasive damage, killing off transgressive fictioneers with sneers of demented nostalgia. In the resulting post-apocalyptic landscape, Campbellian SF rules despotically as the exemplar against which all new SF must be measured.

Just look at the contents of the current crop of year's best SF anthologies or glance at the shortlists of the genre awards. With a few scattered exceptions, it's 1950 all over again.

I was first attracted to SF because of its transgressive nature. It's that potential for transgression that still keeps me interested, that potential to subvert consensus reality and to reimagine the world. As always, the world is in dire need of reimagining, and SF – with its license to speculate wildly – is the branch of literature with the tools best suited to radical reconceptualizations of reality.

Human existence is more than ever one of constant change. SF could not only address the anxieties and conflicts arising from such a rapid pace of societal transformation but also embrace never-before imagined potentialities, celebrate delirious perversions, dream up subversive possibilities.

Campbellian SF in both its classical and contemporary incarnations espouses an ideology that distrusts the heteroglossic diversity of life on Earth. The subtext of Campbellian SF is the dogma of the twentieth century's emblematic religion, the scientific worldview of white Christian European/Euroamerican culture: the sanctity of 'progress', anthropocentric domination, and the dichotomic opposition of nature and culture that perpetuates the alienation of humanity from its environment. The better SF espouses and articulates these beliefs, the more it is lauded by the SF establishment.

Campbellian SF is a fundamentally conservative appropriation of the transgressive genre fashioned by the modern Hephaestus, HG Wells. Wells's fictions didn't reinforce the dominant ideology. He used SF as a means to transgress against imperialism (*The War of the Worlds*), ethnocentrism ('The Country of the Blind'), class and capitalism (*The Time Machine*), and the scientific worldview itself (*The Island of Dr Moreau*).

And then came Hugo the Baptist and Jesus W Christ: Hugo Gernsback drenching SF in his childish infatuation with gadgets, followed by John W Campbell, preaching the gospel of the scientific worldview. This new school of SF replaced Wells's transgressions against consensus reality with stories that glorified white human domination over all other lifeforms. In diluted form (to account for changing social norms), that ideology still taints SF. Contrasting with Wells's utopian socialism, many of today's Campbellian SF writers are right-wing libertarians.

There have been waves of new transgressive SFs; both the New Wave and cyberpunk attempted to break the stranglehold of Campbellian SF. Both were met with reactionary nostalgia within SF, despite that, because of both movements, the outside world paid attention to SF – abortively pertinent before it retreated, in both cases, into its Campbellian pseudowomb.

Transgressive SF – Paul Di Filippo's brilliantly subversive utopia 'Campbell's World' is its brashest call to arms – is shunned by the SF establishment, which fears threats to the hegemony of its conservative agenda.

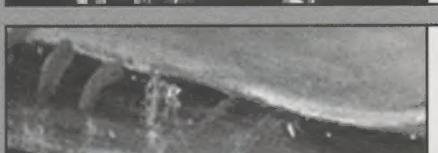
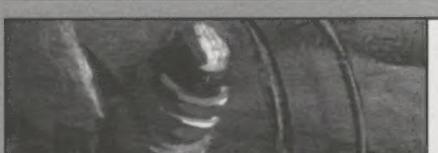
Nowadays, commercial SF has retreated even further into insular nostalgia, alienating new readers by glorifying an outdated model of fiction that reinforces an ideology that was already obsolete 50 years ago. SF's reactionary conservatism is hostile to the subversive energy of youth, to the rapidly changing polycultural zeitgeist, and to transgressive dreams.

No wonder that young people – tuned in to and hungry for all these things that SF should be indulging in – aren't reading SF anymore.

'Claude Lalumière's Critical Speculations' is the latest addition to TTAlkback, TTA's online discussion forum (www.ttapress.com/discuss). Talk to Claude there about this editorial, or indeed any of his other comments and reviews that appear regularly in places like *Locus* and *January Magazine*.

DAVID HO**COVER: THE LOST SOULS**

David was born in 1969. He earned a bachelors in degree in Art History and Fine Arts at San Jose State University and now lives in Northern California where he works as a freelance illustrator and graphic designer. His book, *Shadow Maker*, is out now. www.davidho.com (buy *Shadow Maker* direct from here)

**JOACHIM LUETKE****THE ROUTINE**

Joachim is a successful multimedia artist who has created arresting images for posters, ads, CDs, books and films. He studied art in Switzerland and improved his unique, disturbing talent at the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna. He still lives in Vienna. www.luetke.com

**SIMON DURIC****THE GREEN MAN**

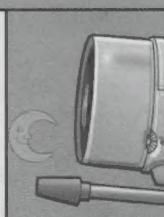
Simon was born in 1978 in a tiny nondescript village in Derbyshire, but now lives in Nottingham. He's been to university twice, leaving the first time because the course was crap, and the second time because he was asked.

www.redsine.com/duric8

**BRUCE RICHARDSON****CHILDISH THINGS**

Bruce recently completed an HND in graphic design and illustration at the Oxfordshire School of Art and Design. He has now started his own small studio and has illustrated a children's book as well as *Mutants Are Everywhere Phase II*.

www.funkyimage.co.uk

**MARC WERNER****ONE BOX OF BOOKS**

Marc Werner is a writer and photographer. Born in 1968, he has lived in Paris, Berlin and Brussels, but is currently based in London. He is writing a book about the application of Dalí's 'paranoiac critical method' to photography. This is his first time in TTA.

**JOHN MYROSHNYCENKO****THE MACHINE**

John lives with his girlfriend in Waddington, near Lincoln. After studying at the North Wales School of Art in Wrexham, he now does private commissions and illustrations for magazines. John's preference is for dark, atmospheric work in acrylic. NB: John also supplied the spotlights for 'The Routine'.

**RICK HUDSON****THE PRODUCER**

Rick has been illustrating books, magazines and comics since 1995, when he graduated fromMontserrat College of Art. He is one of two senior partners at Rawshark Studios (rawshark.com), encompassing everything from comic books to sculpture. <http://home.earthlink.net/~rhudson1877>

**COMING SOON**

Lined up for future issues we have a brilliant new novella by John Grant and superb new stories by Joel Lane, Tony Richards, Sarah Singleton, Christopher Fowler and others; interviews with Brian Aldiss, Neil Gaiman, Mark Chadbourn; artwork by Mike Bohatch (right) and the usual team plus new recruit Scott Craig.



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THE ROUTINE

Steve Mannion never did things by halves. He drank pints of lager, ate full English breakfasts and when it came to killing, well, nobody had ever survived his double-ups. Steve Mannion had killed eleven people.

"And what's a 'double-up', exactly?" Koma wanted to know.
"Insurance," Mannion replied, looking around at the men slouched at the bar, the harsh neon lights gleaming off their number one haircuts. Everyone looked relaxed, but in a pub like this one – The Occasional Half, on the corner of Kelvin Street and Green Lanes – violence was only a spilled drink or a careless word away. You could read it in their blue tattoos and the way they smoked, pinching the end of a cigarette between forefinger and thumb. You could see it in their eyes, if they allowed you to get near enough.

"You can put a man on the floor with a chiv, but there's no guarantee that's where he'll stay. Unless you stab him through the heart, there's every chance he'll get up again. So I double-up. If I start with a knife, I'll have something else to finish him off. Piece of razor wire to garrote the fucker with, say. Or if I'm lucky, and I can get hold of a piece, shoot him through the eye."

"Why not just shoot him through the eye in the first place? Have done with it."

"It's best to mix it up. Keeps you on your toes. And you should never use the same gun for more than one job. Anyway," he said, smiling slightly, "nobody else doubles up. It's like . . . my calling card."

"All sounds very laid-back," Koma said. "Don't you ever have, you know, a sense of urgency?"

Mannion drained half of his pint in one long swallow. "Rushing isn't going to do anybody any good. I do a good job. If I didn't, I wouldn't get asked again." Another glance to the bar. Three men. Plus the guy serving. Away to the left, near the juke box, a young girl in a Sergio Tacchini track suit smoking Lambert & Butler, picking at a scab on her knuckle, her face leached white from smack. Trying to look disinterested. Failing miserably. A couple of kids playing pool, giggling, pissed already on alcopops. DIY head-shaves. Nikeshox cross trainers.

"How long we known each other, Koma?"

The Pole spread his hands. "Four or five years, give or take."

"At that wedding reception, wasn't it? Down the Bluebell?"

Koma nodded, remembering. "Yeah. We crashed it and finished off their ale for them. You were on the dancefloor, trying to tongue the bride's ear."

"Bouncers lamped me for that. You were all for petrol bombing the place when we got chucked out."

Koma laughed softly. "Yeah, good times. Good times."

Mannion watched Koma drift off with his memory, smiling, miles away, years away. Koma was soft. They worked out together down at O'Malley's gym three nights a week but even though he kept up with Mannion, all the bench-presses and crunches and squats, he didn't have the Englishman's power. Koma's muscles boasted bulk without the substance. His abs possessed definition but no solidity. That's what you get when you serve kebabs all day, Mannion thought.

"You're dead, but you don't know it."

Koma froze in the act of draining his glass. "You what?"

Mannion gritted his teeth. "I was speaking for all of us," he said. A beat.

Koma swallowed it, grunting agreement. "Very philosophical."

"I've got a job on tonight," Mannion said, as casually as if he were passing on a racing tip.

"You're kidding. You've been on the piss since five."

"No matter. The guy I'm offing will be in a worse state than me, I'm telling you. I could be falling down arseholed and I'd still have no problems with him."

"Don't you ever wonder about this job?" Koma asked him. "I mean, you're pulling in a fair wedge, no doubt . . ."

"No fucking doubt," Mannion said, winking.

" . . . yeah, but, don't you ever wonder that there might be someone getting ready to draw a bead on you? The biter bit, that sort of thing?"

Mannion swallowed hard. "Back in a mo," he muttered. "Got to piss."

In the cubicle, under the excruciating light from a bare 100-watt bulb, Mannion extended the fingers of his left hand. Steady as a rock. Yeah, he thought, recalling Gene Wilder in *Blazing Saddles*, but *this* is my shooting hand.

The mirror spat back a version of himself that he thought he would never see. Tired, lost. Fuck, even scared. On the window ledge lay the corpses of flies and moths that had failed to escape the toilet. For one lunatic moment, Steve believed that if he turned one of the shells over, he might see his own face staring back at him. Koma had brought it out into the open, made real the thing that scared him the most. The possibility of being on the wrong end of a contract had occurred to him, but in his own mind such thoughts could be controlled. Hearing the threat from another's lips was like having a frozen needle stuck into your spine. The fear, he now saw, was paralysing.

Need a holiday, he thought. Need one bad.

He bid goodnight to Koma and went outside. He had parked his Mazda on Lascotts Road. He felt lucid as he slid behind the

GALFA BLAU

wheel. Calm. Move yourself. Keep moving. Don't stop to think. He drove the short distance to Sylvan Avenue and parked the car at the far end of the street. He walked back to number 22 and checked the windows on the houses opposite. Satisfied, he crept along the side of the house, folding himself commando-style over the gate. He was noiseless, but he paused a while on the garden side, listening for movement. The kitchen window was to his left. All he could see in it was a mug tree and a News of the World calendar. He peeked in as he made his way past, crouched beneath the sill. An unfinished plate of chips lay congealing on a fold-away table. A couple of empty Carlsberg cans. A copy of *Swank* and a pink chit from the bookies. On the hob, a frying pan bore a half-moon of pale lard. The window was a smeared ecstasy of swatted flies. Wrinkling his nose, Mannion crept around the rear corner of the house. The garden was untended. A grey squirrel lifted its head clear of the long grass to watch him. The back doors were too loose in their frames to prevent Mannion from breaking in. The bedroom beyond was a tip. Stale cigarette smoke mingled with the high stench of sour alcohol and clung to his clothes like sweat, or fear. As he waited beneath the bed, the fear of reprisal nagged at the corners of his mind like a kitten at a piece of string. He forced it away by recalling his first job.

The first man he killed, a man called Wilcox, had cried for his mother as Mannion tied his hands behind his back and forced him to sink to his knees. He had been banging the wife of the guy who took the contract out on him, a weak, office-type who nevertheless had the money and the balls to go through with this extreme form of revenge. Mannion never met him. He never met any of his clients. That way he couldn't be dragged down if they got a touch of the guilty feelings and poured their guts out to the filth. They didn't know who he was. He didn't know who they were. He only dealt with a middle man. And the poor fuck whose heart had been turned into a bull's eye for the price of a Florida holiday.

"Hello," he had said, pushing through the door of the target's flat. "I'm Steve. You've been a bad lad." Knife out. Big, big knife. "Now I want you to take off all your clothes." And no words after that. Just action. Wilcox had pissed himself, kneeling there naked, snot-faced and piling for mercy. Mannion had to thrust the knife through his windpipe, more to shut him up than anything else. The guy spasmed so violently, he dragged the weapon out of Mannion's grip and jerked back on to the floor, his left knee-cap popping as he trapped his leg underneath him. He was dead, no question, but Mannion wrapped the flex from a table lamp around Wilcox's throat, placed his boot square

against the back of Wilcox's head and pulled on the flex for three full minutes, until the tendons on his forearms were singeing from the effort. That was number one. And it got easier after that.

Near midnight. Mannion had lain on his back in the filth under the bed for the best part of an hour. He heard the key turning slowly in the lock with the ponderous care of the extremely pissed. Uncertain footsteps on the worn hallway carpet. Light switch in the kitchen. Kettle on. A fart. A woman's laughter.

Shit. He wasn't by himself.

Mannion closed his eyes. He had to abort the job or take them both out. He didn't like that. He had been paid for one body. Inching out from under the bed, he had to shelve his hope of a quick exit as he saw the door handle moving. He was able to duck behind it just as it opened and his target came in, leading the woman by the hand. They didn't bother with the light: he was in shadow, while the hallway light picked at the creases and pits of her flesh. He collapsed backwards on to the bed.

"Oh no you don't," she sang, wiggling out of an overtight skirt. Her knickers came off with it too. "Don't you fucking dare drop off till you've seen me right."

Mannion rubbed his lips with the back of his hand. Maybe he should just go. Just get out. Claustrophobia was piling up against him like dirt shovelled into a grave. Her breasts spread thickly across her abdomen once she'd freed them from her bra. Sweat formed a loose W on the skin beneath them. She yanked her partner's jeans down over his thighs. He made a phlegmy note of protest deep in his throat, but she was already cramming him into her mouth by then, trying to draw some kind of substance from him, desperately see-sawing her head into his groin like a paramedic performing CPR on a lost cause.

Mannion felt all those pints of weak lager rising in his craw. The heat in the room was stifling. He pushed against the door and the wedge of light thinned, allowing the darkness to consume her too. She didn't notice. He hit her hard across the back of the head with the butt of his gun. She slid noiselessly to the left, her mouth freeing its prisoner with a wet *schloop*.

"Koma," he whispered softly, leaning over the prostrate figure on the bed. "Koma."

Steve Mannion held down a day job too. His 8-till-6 face was respectable and well-liked. He shaved every morning and dressed smartly. He had acquired the requisite fork-lift qualifications with a speed and efficiency that pleased Weekes, the manager.

Nobody asked him how a lowly warehouse man had managed to buy a swish car like that. Nobody wanted to know where he got to of an evening after he had politely turned down their invitations to go for a curry or a visit to the dogs or a night in the snooker halls. He spent his evenings alone, in his flat off the Caledonian Road, working out on his multi-gym or pushing himself through hard astanga yoga routines. He was 6'0" and weighed 13 stone. He was down to two per cent body fat. He could do a hundred press-ups in under five minutes. He could run six miles in under 40 minutes carrying a 30lb load. Every one of his friends he had allowed to drop by the wayside. Friends were a liability. If he was to succeed he needed to be free of responsibilities. There was nothing in his flat that he couldn't leave in a second if he had to. There was nobody in his life. If he needed a woman, he paid for her, but he didn't need a woman. He knew about tunnel-vision. He knew about focus. He was always in the zone.

Always? Not always. Not of late.

Monday evening, showered and changed. Hugo Boss suit in anthracite. White Turnbull & Asser shirt. Church's shoes in soft black leather. Seiko Kinetic on the wrist. Issey Miyake aftershave. A £90 Nicky Clarke haircut. You had to be a chameleon in this job. You had to fit in. Whether it was some barley wine shit hole in an east end rat run or a wine bar in SW1. Didn't matter. You were adaptable or you were dead. Adaptability was his strength. Mannion could blend in like nobody's business.

Bar Lorca on Stoke Newington Church Street, a Smirnoff Mule cooling his fingertips. Mannion allowed himself a deep breath and wished that he smoked. Tonight was a possibility. Tonight might give him a big in. This man is dedicated, this man will kill a friend to get ahead. He is dead on it. He is tight. He sipped at his drink and tried not to look at his watch. That afternoon, Terry in his sandwich van had handed over an envelope with his chicken and mushroom pie and can of Tizer. "Nice one," Terry had said, before driving off. And Terry was right.

A salsa class was in full swing. Up on an enclosed dais, a dozen lumpen wannabes were being put through their paces by a lithe woman in hipsters and a cropped top. Black hair drawn back in a glossy ponytail. Her belly was spirit-level flat, a jewel winking at her navel. Mannion watched the punters pair off into drunken bump and grind routines. The teacher did the rounds, showing them how it should be done. He chewed his lip and looked at his watch. A minute to nine. He would give them the 60 seconds and then he would leave, as much as it hurt to do so. They would expect it of him. Professionals did not fuck around with deadlines.

On the hour, he pushed his bottle back and stood up.

"Where are you going?" It was the salsa teacher, leaning on the railings.

Okay, okay. "I'm supposed to meet someone here."

"You just met her."

"And you are?"

"I don't do names."

He let that pass and waited.

"I'm to give you this," she said finally, reaching into her waistband and pulling out a plastic money bag. She held it out to him between her first and middle finger. Waggled it a bit. Bait for the fish. He took it and after a beat, she let it go. It was warm from her skin.

"What now?" Mannion asked, hating the way it sounded. Hating the amateur that was reeling inside.

The girl frowned. "Sorry?" she said. "Do I know you?"

Once he had memorised the street name and the telephone number, he burned the money bag and the fold of paper inside

it. He caught a cab to Earl's Court and got the driver to drop him off two streets away from his intended destination. Nevern Place was a broad, leafy thoroughfare with big Georgian houses and coiled columns that reminded Mannion of cough candy twists. In the gloaming, the coral-coloured façades seemed luminescent, as if lit from within. Halfway down the street was a hotel, the Excelsior. A cheap red plastic awning hung over a dingy entrance. A sign said: v CAN IES. Mannion hopped up the steps and asked the receptionist if there was a public telephone he could use. She pointed to an old finger-dialled affair bolted to the wall near the fire exit. The receiver smelled of nicotine and perfume. He dialled the number and before any ringing tone had a chance to make itself known, a voice answered.

"His name is Dolan, Eddie Dolan, and he is staying in the hotel you're calling from. Tonight he will be travelling to a pub in north London. We want you to follow him and tell us who he talks to on the way. You'll know him when you see him. We don't want him to survive the evening. We will contact you for the information tomorrow. This number will not be active once we sign off. Payment will be made tomorrow. Make it clean and make certain."

The voice was cut off. Mannion replaced the receiver and looked down at his hand. It was shaking. He needed a drink but the hotel bar was closed. Curious, he tried the number again. A flat tone told him what he already knew. He had once thought that working for the cream would be exhilarating. All it did, however, was put him more on edge.

"Can I get a beer?" he asked the receptionist, who gave him a look that was all, *What do you think this place is? A hotel?*

"Forget about it," Mannion snapped, and stalked outside. Then it struck him that Dolan might already have left for his gig, and he leaned back through the entrance. The receptionist raised her eyebrows.

"Is there a guy called Dolan staying here?" Mannion asked. "I mean, has he left yet?"

"I'm not at liberty to say, sir," she replied, the words heavy with contempt.

"Fine."

The street was exposed. There were no pubs to sit inside, no shops to loiter around. Mannion reached into his pocket for cigarettes that weren't there. He had never drawn a lungful of smoke, but he wished for the habit now; it would be something to hide behind. He was beginning to think this whole evening was labelled with the word MISTAKE. For one thing, this street, smart though it was, made him as conspicuous as shit on a wedding cake. It was dark now, but his suit stood out against the pale cream of the houses. He looked like an insurance salesman, or worse, a plain-clothes cop trying too hard to blend in. And he had slipped up with the receptionist. Acted too odd. She would remember him now. Why couldn't they have just given him the venue? Why all this rigmarole?

To test you, he answered himself. To see if you excel, to see if you're different gravy. "Pull this off and you're in, Manny," he muttered. "Pull this off and it's private jets and casinos for you, my son." He sank back against the buildings. To his left, a basement flat with a FOR SALE sign. He let himself through the gate and hunkered down on the steps. Easy, once you calm down, Manny. Easy as.

An hour passed. Mannion had not moved a muscle. His eyes had not strayed once from the entrance doors of the Excelsior. Three people had gone in. One person – a middle-aged woman carrying a Hermes shopping bag – had come out. Now another figure left the hotel. Tall, thin, with dark hair that flopped around his forehead. He was wearing a pale blue linen suit that looked a size too small for him. White socks flashed above a pair of Converse All-Stars. He carried a large, black briefcase of bat-

tered leather, which bore fading gold letters in the centre: E.D.

Mannion rubbed his lips with the back of his hand. "Okay," he whispered. "Okay. Surf's up."

They got on a tube train at Earl's Court underground station, Mannion embarking on the carriage behind Dolan's. At Embankment, Dolan switched to the Northern Line and caught a train up to Belsize Park. Mannion stood close enough to him in the lift to be able to see shaving nicks on his cheek and his pulse, slow and even, just above his collar.

Haverstock Hill was throbbing with people. The chairs and tables outside the restaurants and cafés buzzed with laughter and conversation. Everything looked clean and safe here; the light polished the road and pavement and the acres of skin and cellulose that moved along them. Mannion's suit suddenly seemed positively humdrum. He smiled at a woman holding a glass of wine and tickets for the cinema. The night seemed to be in him, of him. And he of it. Relaxing now, allowing his prey a longer leash, Mannion followed Dolan across the main drag and into Belsize Grove. Halfway down, Dolan turned left into Primrose Gardens, two rows of terraced houses facing each other over a crescent of greensward. In the warm evening, the smell of lavender was almost stifling; Dolan sneezed twice in quick succession.

"Bless you," Mannion murmured. The folded steel in his pocket felt cool against his thigh.

Past a mews at the end of the road, Dolan turned right into England's Lane. Mannion hung back when he reached the junction and saw the pub on the corner. KOMEDY NITE read a sign in chalk on blackboard outside. There was an off licence to his left. He went in and bought twenty Silk Cut.

"Anyone here like Essex girl jokes? Anyone? Anyone from Essex in the audience? Any girls? Apart from you, sir. Now this one . . . this one'll kill you dead."

Mannion stood at the back of the room, leaning against the small bar and watched Dolan suffer. Dolan's jacket was off, slung over one shoulder in what the comedian obviously hoped was an insouciant way, but merely looked desperate. A disc of sweat was blooming under his arms.

"This Essex girl is driving to work, and obviously she's doing her make-up in the rear-view mirror. She veers off the road and crashes into a tree. She's in a bit of a bad way. Ambulance turns up, paramedic jumps out and kneels by her injured body on the roadside. He says, 'Hello, love. What's your name, love?' and the girl says, 'Sharon'. And the paramedic's looking at her damaged body and says, 'Where are you bleeding from, Sharon?' and the girl says, 'Romford'."

There was a small pocket of laughter from the far corner of the room. It was smoky and hot here in the pub basement. Dolan was visible through a blue haze that wreathed the heads of those sitting on the rows in front of the bar. The sound of traffic up above was a drone slipping through the ventilation grille. But for that, this room might have become a little too claustrophobic for Mannion's liking. He preferred cool air and legroom. He didn't like to be boxed in. But he could hack it. He was, after all, Mr Adaptable. Just look upon it as another part of the test, he encouraged himself. You can do this. You can do it with your eyes shut.

Dolan took a sip from a glass of water. His lips looked ashen in the lights and he was squinting at the crowd, eyebrows colliding beneath a broad forehead that was greasy with perspiration. "Hey, aren't peanuts funny," he said, his voice threatening to crack with nervousness. "Peanuts. Hysterical. I see a peanut and I fucking piss myself. No, um, hang on. Not peanuts. What am I talking about? I meant clowns."

Mannion heard himself very clearly order another pint of

Carling. Somebody coughed; a chair leg squealed on the floor. A man wearing a hat was bobbing his head around as though it were attached to a spring. Maybe he was laughing. There was another punter with his collar up who kept rubbing at his throat as if he had a crick in it.

"People say to me, they say, 'Eddie! Have you got any advice for a would-be comedian?' And I say, yes, I do, never piss on an electric fence."

Another volley of almost-laughter that died before it had really started. "Don't worry, people," Dolan said, "I can do impressions too. Who would you like me to do an impression of?"

Someone called out, "A comedian!" which drew the biggest laugh of the evening.

"I never wanted to be a comedian," Dolan went on, gamely. "My eyes wouldn't swivel independently of each other and I was hopeless at changing colour."

"What? So you've always been shit brown then?"

More laughter. Dolan swallowed, his face slackening. Mannion searched the heads for the heckler, but he couldn't see anything for the fug of smoke and harsh spots that were slowly sapping Dolan's will. Mannion almost felt sorry for him.

"Look, this is my job," Dolan pleaded. "I don't turn up at your work and spit on the burgers."

There was a little cheer at this fightback. Mannion chuckled to himself as he studied the comedian's physicality. But the heckler wasn't finished. "That can't be your face . . . did your neck throw up?"

And now Mannion did catch a glimpse of the heckler. Just a profile, through the smoke, for a second, before it sank back to be replaced by the glare of a spot. Mannion felt his balls clench and the skin at his nape grow tight and cold. A blade of memory stabbed through his mind: a man trying to gather the coils of his intestines in his arms in a room on the tenth floor of the George Hotel in Langham Place, just before Mannion tumbled him out of the window.

"Seatbelts. Now there's a thing." Dolan's voice was coming to him as though through wads of cotton wool. "You have seatbelts on cars and seatbelts on aeroplanes, but no seatbelts on trains or boats . . . What? You're expecting a gag? I was just making conversation."

"Vodka," Mannion demanded, pushing away the tepid beer. He downed the shot and lit another cigarette. It was time to go. Dolan was winding his act down anyway – if you could call his abject performance something so grand – battered by a growing chorus of *off!, off!, off!* A slow hand clap filled the tiny room. The man in the hat was trying to turn round, his head bobbing all the time. A thin finger of blood was extending beneath the brim, following the groove that covered his spine. The punter with his collar up finally left his throat alone to pick up a pint of beer. Was it the light that made his hand appear to be sopping red?

Mannion pushed his way through the other punters massed at the door and climbed the steps into the street. The evening air was frigid against his damp face. He breathed in sharply, trying to evict the bitter mingle of spirits and nicotine from his mouth. He checked and rechecked his pockets for weapons he knew were there. His hand batted spasmodically against his chest as he smoothed down his shirt front. Get a grip. But it was hard. So hard to get a grip. Especially when he was convinced that one of the observers he had pushed past on his way out of the club was Koma.

Half an hour or so in shadow, waiting, watching, trying to work the shit out of his system. Adapt to this, you fool, you idiot. Deal with it.

The foot of Eton Avenue was well guarded; he was cocooned

by the generous overhanging canopy of a tree. The large, brooding houses seemed to have solidified within skins of darkness. Slowly the pub emptied, last orders having been rung a good 30 minutes previously. Mannion gradually reined in his panic. The heat and the booze had affected him, that and the tobacco, which had given him a hit he hadn't expected. He felt faintly sick and had crushed the remaining cigarettes in a hand that was eager to mete out more damage. He shouldn't allow himself to be so easily tricked by illusions. The best in this business knew a dislocation that was almost Zen-like. Nothing impinged. If his clients had seen him at all tonight (and who was to say they did not have a few plants there, to gauge his progress?) then they would file very unfavourable reports. He must redeem himself.

Suddenly Dolan was in the street, drawing the lapels of his jacket around him, loping across the road on to the pavement opposite Mannion. He strode by, the battered briefcase bashing against his leg. He didn't seem unduly affected by the audience's treatment of him; perhaps he was used to it.

Mannion had to walk quickly to keep pace with the taller man. He watched his quarry's shadow extend and contract under those streetlamps that weren't burned out or smashed. He realised he must take him here, on this street, before they reached the end of it: Swiss Cottage lay at the other side, and at this time of night it would be busy with traffic and people trying to get home.

His hand under his shirt slid around the ridged handle of the Busse Satin Jack in its sheath. He had bought the combat knife off Terry three years ago and had never used it. But he had handled the blade often, until he was comfortable with its heft and grip. He had slept with it under his pillow and sharpened and cleaned its edge until its sharpness seemed something translucent. After this job, it would go in the river.

In a pouch in his pocket, he carried his 'doubler': a Bayer 100ml syringe loaded with paraffin.

When he saw his opportunity, he took it: Dolan drew level with an abandoned house, its forecourt a dark arena containing some hired plant and piles of sand and cement. There was nobody else in sight. In five quick strides Mannion was on him, winding a gloved hand around the longish hair and pulling back the head. The other hand held the flashing blade at his throat.

"Good evening," said Mannion, levelly. "I'm Steve."

Behind the shelter of a skip filled with rotted timber and rusted pipes, Steve flipped the comedian - who was shivering with fear and had already emptied his bladder - on to his front.

"Please -" Dolan gasped.

"With pleasure," Mannion whispered, and slid the blade in between the vertebrae of Dolan's neck. He pushed until he felt the gritting of bone vibrate in his arm, then he withdrew the blade, cleaned it against Dolan's jacket and stepped back from the motionless body. The method ought to have finished him, but Mannion withdrew the syringe and uncapped the needle.

"You miserable bastard," the comedian wheezed. "I already died once tonight. On that fucking stage."

He was trying to get up. He was trying to get up.

Mannion felt his forehead turn into a bubblewrap of sweat. He held the syringe up to the light and checked there were no blockages by ejecting a few millilitres of liquid. His hand was shaking so much that he dropped it into the sand.

The comedian was laughing. He was sitting up now, his head jiggling unsteadily on his shoulders, producing little scraping and squealing noises from his injury. "You're funny," Dolan said, and a black tide of blood leapt from his mouth. "Dead funny."

"Shut up!" Mannion hissed. He snatched another handful

of hair, wincing as the head gritted back on its sheared pivot, and plunged the needle deep into Dolan's left eye. When the plastic housing was flush with the surface of the eye, Mannion depressed the plunger. Then he nimbly stepped away, allowing Dolan to tip backwards. His head struck the edge of pile of bricks; he made a muffled, inquisitive sound at the back of his throat. Then he lay still on the floor. Half of his face was sheened with paraffin, and the jellied remains of his eye.

"Triples all round," Mannion said. A quick check of the street behind him - still in blissful ignorance - before he flicked the wheel of a disposable plastic lighter and set fire to Dolan's head.

Moving away quickly now, brushing down his suit, primping his hair. The sweet smell of paraffin mingled with the acrid reek of burning hair. Mannion could almost taste the Bollinger RD; he could almost feel the cool edges of the platinum credit cards and the hard bodies on the high-class skirt that was coming his way. His prick felt hard and hot in his boxers, and his head was clean for the first time in days. Just nerves, just stress, he soothed. Just -

"Laugh?" came the voice. "Laugh?"

Mannion stopped and turned round. His tongue turned into a desert pebble. Dolan was sitting up. His head was a sheaf of flames; at its blackened core, layers of skin and flesh were peeling off and dropping languidly to the ground. His voice carried to him like the dry scuff of sandpaper.

"Laugh? I nearly died . . ."

And then Mannion was sprinting along Eton Avenue, and he was vaguely aware of his shadow rotating and stretching around him as he surged into new spheres of lamplight, but he never once looked down, in case, just in case, he didn't really have a shadow after all.

The guy behind the bar, a barefoot Kiwi wearing a goatee beard and a gold ring through one ear, didn't have a clue who he was talking about.

"Young girl," Mannion said again. "Pony tail. Athletic figure." He had to move back from the counter to allow one of the cleaners to get at the dirty ashtrays.

"Yeah, yeah, yeah," said the barman. "Like you said. And she was teaching salsa. But like I said, I don't know her. Do you want a drink or something?"

Mannion pushed himself away from the bar and sauntered to the dais as if proximity to the platform might explain her to him. A notice said that the next salsa lesson was in three days time, but he couldn't wait that long and even if he did, he knew that the teacher would not be who he wanted it to be. She was a plant. She was his contact, that was all.

He had called Terry that morning, having spent the night drinking cans of tepid Harp lager in a seedy drinking club in Soho. He staggered into the litter-strewn streets when the guy behind the counter pointed to the empty crate. It took him the best part of two hours to walk to Stoke Newington, watching the sky lighten and listening to the cacophony of birds. By the time he reached Bar Lorca, traffic was throbbing through north London and the cafes were doing a roaring trade.

Terry was none the wiser and he took pains to explain that to Mannion. "I'm just the middle man," he said. "Friends of friends ask me 'Do you know someone who . . . ?' and I say yes. You should know that, Manny. You should know that. What happened last night? Fuck-up?"

He had done the job that was asked of him. He wanted his money.

"You might find her in the bookshop."

"Sorry?" Mannion turned to find the cleaner staring at him. She was a squat woman with a face that looked as though it



had got used to the word 'no'. Her eyes were disconcertingly close together and her lips were thin and colourless.

"The woman you're after. Suki. She advertises salsa classes, and other things, on the notice board at Kerwick's bookshop. You know, the second hand place up the road."

Mannion thanked her and went outside. It was starting to rain. A bright cone of light to the east was being closed off by black acres of cloud like the iris in a camera lens. He could see up ahead the illuminated window of the bookshop; he ran towards it as the rain quickened. Outside the shop, a small bookcase advertised old paperbacks for 50p each. A smell of staleness hit him as he entered, mingled with the unmistakeable odour of wet dogs. There was a man in a beanie hat sitting behind a large desk but he didn't look up when Mannion entered, preferring instead his history of the Boer War. The damp Alsatian by his side paid him more attention, but not much more, settling back to sleep once it was clear the stranger had come without food.

There was a cork board fastened to the wall, obscured by a riot of papers advertising flats to rent, music and language lessons, pets for sale and various New Age courses in stress management and feng shui.

After a minute or so of riffling through the adverts, his eye fell on the name Suki, written out in violet felt tip. SALSA DANCING SPECIALIST EAGER TO PASS ON HER SKILLS, her offer read, ONE-TO-ONE OR GROUP LESSONS, COMPETITIVE RATES, CALL SUKI ON –

Mannion scribbled down her number and stepped out once more into the street. The sound of the bell in the door jangling, and the single, strident bark of the Alsatian was suddenly lost to an enormous crack of thunder. Drenched already, Mannion turned his face up to the sky and let the water splash in his eyes. As he folded up the piece of paper and placed it in his pocket, he idly wondered how long he would have to stay in this position before the rain washed away the scenes his eyes had witnessed.

She lived in a large flat on Ferme Park Road. Mannion brought his Mazda to a standstill across from the imposing Victorian building that contained her address and listened to the rain beat heavily on the car roof. A light was on in the ground floor flat, turned orange by the curtains pulled across the window. Wisteria climbed the walls beside the doorway; a monkey puzzle tree threw bizarre shapes in the centre of a tiny front lawn.

Mannion trotted across the road and rang the bell. When she opened the door, he kicked it backwards and followed her into the hall, swinging the door closed. He had locked his car maybe fifteen seconds earlier. There had been nobody in the street. He felt quick and dangerous. Confident. It felt like some of this chancy weather had stolen into his veins.

"I didn't get paid," he said.

Suki was trying to lever herself upright; she looked like a sunbather resting on her elbows to have a look at what was happening on the beach for a while. Blood formed a moustache across her lip. It had splashed across a pale green vest top bearing the stencilled letters FBI, and, in a smaller type beneath: FIT, BEAUTIFUL, INTELLIGENT.

She made a noise that might have been a question.

Mannion said, "I didn't get paid."

"Do I know you?" she asked, testily. Mannion liked it that she wasn't scared.

"Stop playing around. Tell me where I find them."

"Who?"

"The people who set me up to kill the comedian."

Suki shakily got to her feet and clamped her hands over her ears. "Whoa, whoa, whoa! You talk too much. I don't want to hear any of this. Any of it!"

"Too late for that."

She pushed past him and headed for the kitchen. It was a nice flat, split-level. Very bare. A large grey pebble sat on wooden floorboards. All of the surfaces were free of clutter; there were no pictures on the walls. No books. No magazines. No TV. It looked like a flat she'd only just moved into, or was about to leave. A candle flickered in a pale china crucible, its flame smelling heavily of burnt dust and tallow.

"I'm a dead woman," she was saying. "I'm fucking dead. That's it." She stood over the sink, dabbing her face with moistened kitchen roll.

"What are you talking about?"

She stared at him. Reflected light from a blade on the draining board trembled at her chin, making her appear on the verge of tears. But her voice was strong, her jaw set in a defiant pose that was almost childish. "You fucking idiot. Why should I know who they are or where they're based? I'm just a messenger. Someone I don't know pays me money to do errands for people I've never met, people I've never heard whispers about. You made contact and now I'm dead. As good as. If they don't kill me then I'll never work for them again."

"I want my money."

"Take it up with your union," she said. "If you did the job they wanted you to do – "

"I did. I did the job."

"Then they'll pay you. The only way they wouldn't pay you is if you failed. Or died." She leaned over and opened the refrigerator door, her breast rubbing across his forearm. She pulled a bottle of Fitou from the shelf. Then she looked up at him with brown, expressionless eyes. She said, "Now fuck off."

At the door he called back to her. "I'm sorry about the nose."

"Don't worry," she said. "Pain is something I'll need to get used to. Hell, maybe you should get used to it too."

He had not known much about pain. His parents had died when he was just a child, an only child. A series of foster parents had been thwarted by his rebellious, destructive streak. He was in and out of child care units until the age of fourteen. The only ties he'd got were at home, keeping his bread fresh.

Physical pain he saw as an essential part of his job. He pushed himself hard when he exercised, and often fainted or vomited when his body had been forced beyond its limit. He couldn't work out whether it was a good thing that he had escaped without any physical injury; did that mean he was good at his job? Or lucky?

Alone in The Occasional Half, he reflected on the fact that he had never questioned himself like this before. Maybe he had come to the end of the line just as he thought his career ought to be taking off. Maybe he would be nothing better than an estate-stalker, whacking scum on benefit for a measly thousand pounds a pop.

He sat up, for Christ's sake. He sat up and he talked to me.

The more he drank, the more he thought about the awfulness of the previous night. There had been nothing on the news about a body being found in Eton Avenue, and no word on the grapevine here in the pub. Another pint, and those events began to take on a preposterous mien. It was stress that morphed every head that turned to him into one he had struck the life from. It was exhaustion that had brought the comedian back from the dead, nothing else.

Then where is his body?

Mannion ignored the question and left the pub, not so drunk that he forgot to check who was watching him leave, not so tired that he didn't double back on his route home, to ensure nobody was following him. But at the last moment he chose not to go home, swinging the car into Endymion Road. To his left, Finsbury Park trapped the sounds of drums and bass like

a pebble bouncing around in a barrel. People streamed into and out of the gates dressed in Mardi Gras gear. Men sashayed around in stockings and bras; women staggered against them, wearing bowler hats or feather head-dresses. They carried bottles of cider and wine and slapped their hands on the bonnets of the passing cars.

He felt bad about how it had gone, with Suki. He should not have left her to tend her wounds and should have offered, at least, to protect her from her perceived threat. She could have come home with him, or he could have slept on her sofa for that night, just to show her that there was nothing to fear. It might have been some kind of payback for the damage he had caused.

As he was nosing through the last of the revellers, a man in a witch doctor's outfit suddenly leaned across the bonnet and yelled something unintelligible at him. He was bare-chested, his breast painted red. Some kind of effigy dangled around his neck. Mannion felt his heart stutter; the witch doctor slapped a hand on the windscreen and shrank back into the crowd, his blacked-up face and white-rimmed eyes fast on him all the time. It was only as he parked the car under the streetlamp outside Suki's flat that Mannion noticed that the print had remained, edged as it was with blood.

The door to the flat was ajar. He stood in the hallway, smelling again the scorched aspect to the air, though now there were no candles burning. A shadow up ahead dipped into the wedge of bright yellow on the kitchen floor, then fell away again. Dipped in, fell away . . .

He untied her from the flex of the kitchen light and let her body drop awkwardly to the floor; rigor meant that she tilted on her heel and went down without give, her head cracking heavily against the corner of the worktop. Her face was so bloodied he thought that her lower jaw must have been removed. Mannion pushed her clear of the refrigerator door with his foot and rescued the dregs of the Fitou she had opened the previous night. He drained the bottle and regarded Suki again. Her jaw was intact; the blood was from her tongue, which had been snipped out. The kitchen scissors that had been used were on the chopping board, along with a few partly sliced bulbs of pak choi that had wilted and been dyed pink by the wash of blood. The tongue itself was nowhere to be seen.

He stood in the centre of the kitchen, the light still dancing above him, twirling his shadow over the swollen, split face of the girl. He realised then that what had been hoodwinking him all this time was nothing to do with stress or fear, it was anger. Someone was ass-fucking him all over London, seeing how he dealt with adverse conditions, and he was showing them that he was dealing with them very badly indeed. Well enough of that now. Enough.

He got in the car and gunned the engine. In ten minutes, the roads filled with the sounds of curses and horns blaring as he cut up motorists, he was turning right out of Prince of Wales road and following the main drag up to Belsize Park. Eton Avenue was a dark mass again, withdrawing from the street as if afraid of it. The dark, old houses were wreathed in shadows, the sodium lights unable to pick any detail from them, beyond the odd gleam of metal or glass. The quiet settled around him like a secret invasion of snow. He parked the car by the building site, the execution site, and sat quietly looking out at the melange of sand and cement and timber under fluttering polythene. The star of the witch doctor's hand was black on the windscreen. The branches of the trees that Mannion could see through the gaps in the print shivered, became the token on the leather thong around the tensed, heavily-corded neck that flapped and painted his chest.

A killer is a painter and decorator, he had whispered to

Koma as he sawed through his breastbone. The client – Koma's cheated wife – had wanted his heart flushed down the toilet. *Any colour, so long as it's red.*

The comedian was not there. He felt a tremor of shock shift through him, even though he had expected to find nothing. Because it was the weekend, it meant that none of the tools or building materials had been disturbed by workers. Nevertheless, he failed on closer inspection to find anything that suggested there had even been so much as a struggle here. No footprints in the sand, no blood, no burned pieces of clothing or skin . . .

Leaving the car where it stood, Mannion marched down the street to the pub on the corner. Now he understood why the area was so quiet: the doors to the lounge were shut and bolted, the seats within unoccupied. He could just make out the penumbral reach of the counter, if he pressed his face against the glass, the optics and beer taps gleaming faintly.

Mannion rattled the door and pounded on the window. Nobody came to see what the fuss was all about. He stepped back and saw the sign: **SORRY, NOT OPEN TONIGHT. PRIVATE PARTY.**

Very private party, he thought. So private that nobody had turned up. But then he heard a chorus of laughter, and the chink of charged glasses. He walked the perimeter of the pub until he was at the top of the stone steps that would take him into the bowels of the building, where the comedy nights were held.

He wiped his hand across his lips and descended. His fingers splayed on the door felt hot and wet as he pushed his way into the room, he had to dry them off against the seat of his trousers. Inside, the plastic chairs facing the tiny platform were vacant and the mike stand was telescoped to its lowest configuration. The bar too was empty, beer towels hanging over the taps like shoulders slumped in contemplation. The air in here was close, cut with nicotine and the hot, edgy tang of nervous sweat. The soles of his shoes clung at the tacky floor, made sticky kisses in the quiet as he padded around, trying to find a door through to the party. He could hear more clearly now: glasses placed on wooden tables, a cash register opening its mouth, belly laughs, the scrape of chairs on lino.

But he could find no connecting door. Up on the platform then, he reasoned, maybe there was something behind the backdrop of crimson silk.

A spotlight came on as he reached for the draped fabric, burning his outline uncertainly on to its folds. He turned around, squinting into the splintered beam, trying to see the person who had switched it. He heard the strike of a match and fingers of blue smoke reached out to him from the chairs.

He shrugged himself out of his jacket and slung it over his shoulder. Heads were ranged around him, backlit by the spots so that all he could see were silvery halos of hair. By the exit, he could see a man in a dark suit and a brilliant white shirt, drinking vodka. Soft light limned him, told of his hard edges and resilience, the weapons folded into the lining, his quiet determination. He recognised something of himself in the man, but his thoughts were growing fuzzy. He could taste something harsh at the back of his throat, like smoke, or petrol.

From somewhere deep inside something shifted, he heard a voice rise within him, muscling through his body until it broke free of his lips: *"Anyone here like Essex girl jokes? Anyone? Anyone from Essex in the audience? Any girls? Apart from you, sir. Now this one . . . this one'll kill you dead."*

Gala Blau made a considerable impact with her first short story 'Outfangthief', which appeared in Stephen Jones's anthology *The Mammoth Book of Vampire Stories by Women* and was subsequently snapped up for reprinting in *The Year's Best Fantasy & Horror* and *Best New Horror*. Gala was born in 1975 and currently divides her time between London and Berlin where she designs jewellery and is a sometime singer with the band Scheintod.



"I have an all-you-can-eat Mexican buffet approach to life. Why just eat enchiladas, if there's some chilli over there, and guacamole, not to mention the burritos – and Christ, is that a big pot of jambalaya over in the back? I don't want just the one thing: I want a smorgasbord, to mix the nationality of my gustatory metaphor. I like crime, horror, some SF, some mainstream fiction. I also like fiction that makes me laugh. So why not try to do all at once? Why, to use an annoyingly pretentious second metaphor, decide to paint only in black and white when you've got a whole palette to play with?"

MICHAEL MARSHALL SMITH INTERVIEWED BY ANDREW HEDGEYCOCK

NOT TO MENTION THE BURRITOS

Michael Marshall Smith's cavalier attitude to literary boundaries is well established. His first three novels – *Only Forward*, *Spares* and *One of Us* – are exhilarating and vertiginous flights of imagination, fusing genre elements so seamlessly that attempts at classification are doomed to produce limp and inelegant linguistic pile-ups like 'darkly comedic fantasy-thriller' or 'surreal near-future noir'. I begin by asking Smith what attracts him to the fantastic as a mode.

"I was drawn to the fantastic partly because it's such a great form for tackling things that seem important, and partly just this greed thing again. As the great genre writers show, with the fantastic you can do all the stuff the so-called 'mainstream' writers do – the stuff about love, life, and death – but then have fun with the weird

and the spooky too. So why not? I found very early on that for an idea to interest me enough to keep writing, it had to be slightly fantastic. So that's what I do."

Smith seems to subscribe to Heinrich Böll's view of the link between reality and the fantastic: 'Reality is a task . . . it requires our active, not our passive attention. What is real is fantastic.' There are few artists currently working with the same facility for mixing social satire, surrealism, moral philosophy, psychological speculation and ontological game-playing – and even fewer with the capacity to handle it in such a savage, entertaining and idiosyncratic way. Two of the three that spring immediately to mind are American – Thomas Pynchon and the songwriter Warren Zevon – another is Michael Marshall Smith. So

what aspects of modern life provoke Smith's dark laughter? And what features of the way we live now demand an active approach to the construction of reality?

"I think the whole of life demands this kind of approach. Not a day goes by without me thinking 'What? Are you *serious*?' about something or other. And yet we all seem to take these things in our stride. I guess part of the surrealism in the books comes from taking some of these bafflements and writing them large: because the weirder something is, the more it potentially has to say about the way we really are and think. The value of the absurd is that it tests our understanding of reality, and shows us what we really believe. The old zen koan which asks what is the sound of one hand clapping is, it seems to me, fundamentally about showing us that

the great purring engine of our language can still be speed-bumped, that you can construct a perfectly grammatical sentence that means nothing at all. It does this far more concisely than a hundred textbooks on linguistics or semiotics.

"This is true of the dark side of human nature too. It's all very well spending your life in art galleries and churches and concert halls, pointing at all the beautiful things we have done. But there are serial killers and mass graves and corporate thieves out there too. To pretend we only have to take credit for the good things about us is to tell lies about who we are."

So is Smith's genre blending a planned process, based on this 'absurdist' perspective, or is it an emergent property of the stories themselves?

"A planned process? To be honest, with *Only Forward* I did absolutely no planning of any kind. None whatsoever. I'd previously started a pretty straight-down-the-line horror novel, only to find that it didn't interest me very much: not enough, at least, to keep me writing stuff down. I know enough about the way I write now to suspect it probably wouldn't have ended up very straight-down-the-line, but I didn't know that then. I'd recently returned from holiday, and while away had jotted down a few very short notes – mainly to do with a lead character and some dreams I'd had in the last year or two. So I decided that I'd have a go at playing around with that instead. Once I'd started writing, it just kept on going. After a while I realised this was going to be my first novel, and then I did start to do a little structural thinking, but really I was drawn through the book by the fun of writing it – which is something I wish I could say of all of them. By the first couple of pages it had become clear that it was going to be a intermingling of different genres, which wasn't at all what I expected: most of my previous stories had been firmly in one area. But I was enjoying what I was writing, and just told myself to go for it – imposing no rules whatsoever. *Only Forward* is the result.

"When the novel was bought by Harper-Collins, who also commissioned a second one, I suddenly realised that after six years of writing one kind of fiction I'd suddenly start writing another. This is one of the reasons it took me quite a while to write *Spares*. It's often said that everyone has one novel in them, and while I'm not absolutely sure that's true, I think everyone who's going to write novels will find their first comes pretty naturally. Then comes the task of trying to work out what they're about, and marshalling that."

And Smith has marshalled his material to some effect: building a committed audience; winning Philip K Dick and BFS awards; and earning plaudits from the likes of David Baddiel, Clive Barker and – with his new book *The Straw Men* – his long-time literary hero Stephen King. The perfectly paced plots, incisive throwaway gags, cunning conceits

and well-oiled imaginative traps have charmed readers, reviewers and filmmakers (several of his books and stories have been optioned). But the characteristic that distinguishes him from other virtuoso storytellers is the sustained emotional resonance of his writing. Friend and fellow writer Nicholas Royle sums up Smith's achievement: 'Somehow Mike manages to write top-quality books that combine page-turning thrills and suspense with intelligent thought and profoundly felt emotion. His writing seems to be at its best when it's at its darkest, as in some of the early short stories ('The Dark Land', 'Always', 'Dying', 'More Bitter Than Death', 'Welcome') and *The Straw Men*. Gone are the talking fridges and chatterbox alarm clocks. Fun while they lasted, but never more than a diversion from thoughts of mortality and considerations of the human condition.'

Which brings us to *The Straw Men*, a new departure for Smith in more ways than one. This elegantly constructed and disturbing modern-day thriller – featuring serial murder, dark conspiracy and complex deception – will be published in August 2002 under the name Michael Marshall. So, I ask Smith, what led him to adopt a pseudonym, albeit a particularly transparent one?

"Partly because readers, publishers and booksellers often like to know what they're getting. *The Straw Men* is neither fantasy, SF nor horror. It is, I guess, a modern-day thriller. I'm publishing it, and any successors in a similar vein, under the name Michael Marshall – while the more out-there stuff will continue to be published under Michael Marshall Smith."

So what attracted Smith – and, of course, Marshall – to the contemporary crime and mystery genre?

"To a degree I've always been attracted to it. But just before writing *Spares*, which I kind of regard as a crime/mystery too, I suddenly discovered three writers – James Lee Burke, Jim Thompson, James Ellroy – and became immersed in their various crime universes. In retrospect I think they showed me that all of the different types of writing I wanted to do (hardboiled, like Ellroy; hardboiled but almost mystical, like Thompson; lyrical, like Burke) were different sides of the same thing. All of these approaches are available to SF and fantasy work too – you just have to want to do it."

The tangled narrative web of *The Straw Men* includes a community of people with a shared belief system that has ossified into a rigid – and deadly – design for living. For me, this triggered thoughts on the way in which the 'Aryan Atlantis' theories of Hermann Wirth and others fed into the beliefs and behaviour of the Nazis. To what extent does the conceptual underpinning of Smith's story reflect this process? Does he believe idealistic ways of interpreting the world inevitably trigger murderous and oppressive behaviour?

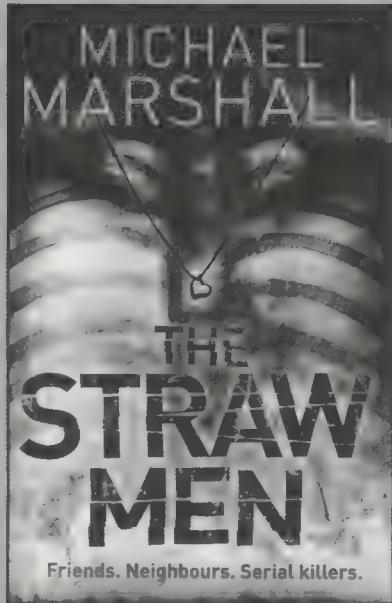
"Any idealist way of interpreting the world

is wrong. It can only be an over-simplification. People seize upon over-simplifications (like conspiracy theories) because they look like an escape route from the fractal, chaotic complexity of real life. Their heads can't take it any more: they just want someone charismatic to tell them how things work, what to believe, and what to do. Of course that's an over-statement, but there's some truth in it. What happens with groups like the Nazis is that it's like everyone agrees to swirl down a vortex of excessive simplicity. Simple myths; simple activities (war, for example); simple hatreds. Like a reinforcement loop. The more your society is simplified, the more powerful its simple slogans. The more powerful, the more controlling. The more controlled people are, the more able their leaders are to be able to make them do terrible things.

"But the opposite argument also has truth in it. Excessive religious devotion is a very strong characteristic of the mentally ill. That doesn't mean there's something inherently wrong with religion, just that it's a simplified paradigm for interpreting the world, and damaged minds often seem to thrive in limited ontologies."

Another of the book's vital themes is the impact of the built environment on cognition and behaviour. At the heart of Smith's speculation on this issue are the architectural theories of Frank Lloyd Wright, who designed his buildings in response to the idea that human beings exhibit an atavistic drive for shelter. I ask Smith if his knowledge of Wright's work came from research for *The Straw Men*, or if it reflected an abiding interest in architecture.

"Very much the latter. I've been interested in certain kinds of architecture for many years, but it was only recently that I realised just how vital concerns of habitation and space had become to what I wrote. I was invited to contribute an introduction to an academic collection called *Lost In Space – Geographies of Science Fiction* (eds Kitchen & Kneale, 2002) and sort of wondered why. It was only as I thought about what I might write that I realised that this was exactly the kind of thing I'd been doing. The fragmented city in *Only Forward*; the spatially organised society of *Spares*; even the real-virtual dichotomies in *One of Us*. I've long had an interest in Frank Lloyd Wright, John Lautner, Bruce Goff, Bart Prince and the more organic forms of building design – and nursed a spluttering hatred of the Internationalist, or, as Bill Bryson has put it, the 'fuck you' school of architecture. It seemed to me that this kind of debate related directly to the book's other underlying concern – a notion about human prehistory – and so right from the beginning I was aiming to integrate the two. I was trying to write about what I believed it is to be human: certain types of architecture seem positively dangerous to me – interior minimalism is, so far as I'm concerned, nothing more than neurosis made flesh. So it was something



THE STRAW MEN

Michael Marshall

HarperCollins hb, 384pp, £10
out now

Sarah tries to struggle, but the man holds her. The scream never makes it out of her throat. 'Nobody's watching,' the man says. 'I made it this way. I can walk where nobody sees.'

Sarah Becker is the fifth girl to be abducted by this maniac. Judging from the state of the bodies that have been found, her long hair will be hacked off and she will be tortured. She has about a week to live.

Former LA homicide detective John Zandt has an inside track on the perpetrator – his own daughter was one of his victims two years ago.

But the key to Sarah's whereabouts lies with Ward Hopkins, a man with a past so secret not even he knows about it. His parents have just died in a car accident, but they leave Ward a bizarre message that leads him to question everything he once believed to be true.

As he begins to investigate his own past Ward finds himself drawn into the shadowy, sinister world of the Straw Men – and into the desperate race to find Sarah, before her time runs out.

Michael Marshall Smith's unique voice adds a chilling intensity to the serial-killer plot, combining dazzling narrative, a white-hot pace and a deeply disturbing backdrop of conspiracy.

I was interested in covering. There are ways of humanising space, and of dehumanising it: what's the difference, and what does it say about us?"

In *City of Quartz* (1990) and his essay 'Beyond Blade Runner' (1992), radical American urban theorist Mike Davis highlighted the trend for the US upper and middle-classes to incarcerate themselves in privately controlled – and privately patrolled – gated communities. There's a scene in *The Straw Men*, funny and depressing by turns, in which one of Smith's protagonists visits a secure and sequestered haven for the ultra-wealthy called 'The Halls'. So does he share Davis's alarm at the increasing rejection of community and urban living by the more affluent sections of society?

"I don't think I'm alarmed, as such: I think they're utterly explicable. It's like a group of rats clubbing together and buying themselves a ladder to climb up and escape from the maze, leaving the rest of us whirling and snarling inside. Something that occurred to me while writing the book was the smallness of our real social groups. Okay, we live in a city, in a country, in Europe and so on – which conjures visions of a community of thousands or millions of people. But look at the number of people on your Christmas card list. That's your *real* community: it's not so very big and half of them are duty cards. It's about the size, in fact, of a prehistoric human tribe, which is kind of interesting.

"All the people in these gated communities are doing is manufacturing themselves a reservation factored around the inhabitants' shared good fortune with regard to money. I think it's a bad thing because it's taking parts of the world off-limits to everyone else: personally I'm bored senseless by both golf and skiing, and divorcing yourself from the reality of your society is a bad thing – for you, but also for your society. If the people with money and influence stop having to care about how fucked up the world is, things can only get worse."

The scene in question is a well-aimed piece of satire with ghastly, but deftly sketched, characters. I ask Smith if he's had the misfortune to run into these people: and has he ever visited anywhere like The Halls?

"The nearest I've ever got to somewhere like that was on a coast-to-coast trip across the US: we were trying to find somewhere to stay in the Gallatin valley near Yellowstone. We were roundly patronised by some guy behind a desk in a lobby not dissimilar to the one described, and proudly informed that all rooms were non-smoking. That counted me out as a resident right away. We went a little further and had a coffee in another proudly tobacco-free establishment, and then fucked off back to a world we could understand. There's something very, very odd about those places. It's like the rich have themselves made over into golf-playing androids. They're genuinely like another species. I wouldn't mind, but they're buying up all the beautiful places and putting fences

around them. Golf courses are like a virulent mutant moss, taking over the countryside and blighting it into the herbaceous equivalent of an airport lounge."

In addition to these entertaining riffs on the theme of environmental causes of violent and antisocial behaviour, Smith tests out the notion that aggression, intolerance and misanthropy may have a hardwired, evolutionary-based element. One section begins with a well-known quotation from Bertrand Russell: 'Few people can be happy unless they hate some other person, nation or creed.' So does Smith take the view that hatred is a genetically mediated behaviour? If so, does this mean our attempts to live together in massively complex communities are doomed to failure?

"I think it's a hard-wired trait exacerbated by contemporary society. I'm on the fence as to whether I actually believe any of the wild theories in the book. I increasingly choose to believe things because they're intriguing rather than out of any concern as to whether they might be true, but I genuinely think we've created a society in which, as Wright put it, we 'grow rank in the urban field'. I'm not sure humans are designed to live in such great numbers, or that we've outgrown a completely explicable distrust of those outside the tribe. That's something else that the book is supposed to be about; a reminder that we're animals, and that much of what we do and how we behave can be more easily explained by remembering that, rather than pretending that we're a bunch of angels wandering amongst beasts. I think we forget that, in terms of the history of our species since we came out of the sea or down from the trees – choose your own marker – our journey from Cro-Magnon and before to modern human has been incredibly short. Virtually everything that applied to us then applies to us now. We're still effectively the same creatures. You can take a dog and dress it in a three-piece suit and give it a mobile phone, but it's still a dog. We are that dog."

"I'm aware that this could be interpreted as a reactionary outlook, but it's not: I think mankind has enormous potential, and that one day we may very well be able to live more harmoniously. That may be the key element of the next stage of our evolution, rather than all this science-heavy cyber-claptrap about becoming one with machines. But for the time being, it just ain't so. We're crap at living together. It's time to stop solely blaming particular ideologies for this. It's also the nature of the beast."

And talking of the nature of the beast: the material on multiple murderers in *The Straw Men* is as convincing as it is unsettling. So was this stuff based on case studies drawn from sedulous delving into press and academic archives? Or was it pure imaginative extrapolation based on a lifetime's exposure to violence in the media?

"Um . . . it was all completely made up. I've read a lot about serial killers over the years, however, and so I'd hope they stay



"It's all very well spending your life in art galleries and churches and concert halls, pointing at all the beautiful things we have done. But there are serial killers and mass graves and corporate thieves out there too. To pretend we only have to take credit for the good things about us is to tell lies about who we are."

more or less within the bounds of possibility. It's a mindset that I sometimes find worryingly easy to enter."

The Straw Men takes its readers rattling along the darkest branch lines of the human psyche. It's a bumpy and terrifying ride at times, but Smith's mordant wit, skilfully rendered characters and – at first – baffling subplots mean there is no question of lunging for the communication cord. And there's a particular pleasure to be derived when the two stories – of bereaved Ward Hopkins and his discovery of dark family secrets; and of John Zandt, a damaged ex-cop with hard-earned insight into the mindset of serial murderers – are adroitly united. I'm keen to discover whether these narrative strands – each freighted with distinct but complementary thematic material – were separate stories, each of which drifted into the gravitational pull of the other, or if they developed in parallel from the novel's central themes.

"I think it was probably a bit of both. They both existed when the book began, largely in spheres of their own. They were always coming towards the same inner material, however, and so it became a case of working out how and when the conjunction would come about. As with most of what I do, the process was largely intuitive and organic: in other words, great fun for some of the time, and a terrifying pain in the arse for the rest."

The storylines are made all the more compelling by an utterly convincing rendition of American life, lifestyle and geography. I ask Smith if he's spent a lot of time in the States, or if he made a dedicated research trip for *The Straw Men*.

"I spent a significant chunk of my childhood in the US – mainly in Florida – and have subsequently visited it on many occasions: there's a degree to which it feels as much like home to me as England does. I've visited the States a fair amount over the last

few years: script work and vacations have taken me to LA and Santa Monica a few times, and *The Straw Men* was started about six months after the coast-to-coast trip I mentioned earlier. My wife and I drove right across the US from Boston to LA, via 5000 miles in between. I wasn't scouting for locations or going out with any story in mind – I never do. It was more a case of looking back through the memory banks for fragments of places which could be bent to other purposes. Dyersburg in the novel does bear a faint resemblance to a particular town in Montana, but I always find – unless reality is critical – that I end up writing about places 'based on' actual locations. I like to be able to really 'see' the places I'm writing about, and that's often easier if I'm imagining them, rather than trying to remember them. I'm much better at remembering atmospheres than facts."

It will be pretty clear by now that we are dealing with a restless literary spirit – a writer reluctant to repeat himself – but there are strong ties linking Michael Marshall's first novel and the more established oeuvre of Michael Marshall Smith.

"As far as I'm concerned, *The Straw Men* differs from the previous novels in only two regards. It is set in the present day, and there is nothing explicitly 'untrue' about it – using 'untrue' in the sense of something that directly contradicts the prevailing consensus reality by being either supernatural, futuristic or just plain silly. These two regards seem pretty trivial to me, but they don't to a lot of people. Hence the split. To be honest, I don't see any real difference between the different strands – my subjects and style remain the same – but I know some readers will feel differently."

Conspiracy – one of the most durable and persistently popular motifs in cinema and literature – is one of the key thematic continuities in Smith's work. What drew Smith to the subject and why does he think it re-

mains a vital issue for contemporary writers?

"Conspiracies are durable because they're true. I'm not saying that any or all of the current favourites have a firm basis in reality, rather that one of the key truths about the world is that sub-sets of humanity collude (consciously or otherwise) to present the world to themselves (or others) in a specific way – and a way which cannot represent the whole. Worrying about the New World Order, who killed JFK, what's happening in Area 51 or what Al Quaida are up to right now is simply a way of concretising and confronting an unspoken – and completely justified – fear that the world is unutterably complex and completely out of any individual or group's control.

"Most good fiction, I suspect, has at its core the realisation that each of us is a tiny, malformed cog in a bewildering machine for which someone has lost the manual. Even the current slew of chick-lit and ladfic (for which I have very, very little time) unconsciously reflects this. Its obsessive concern with holding a mirror up to our middle-class, alchopop-swilling selves is implicitly saying 'Let's concentrate on this trivia, all we hip young things, because we don't understand the rest of it.' Docuseries and 'Reality TV' are doing the same thing. It's self-indulgent navel-gazing, for people who can't be arsed to face the complexities of the world – not to solve them, necessarily, but to enjoy the fact they're there.

"Everybody learns at an early age that they're not the centre of reality. In theory they do, anyway. But we all still believe it. Conspiracy theories are part of our coping mechanism. They provide a set of 'Others' whose actions help explain why we spend so much of our time feeling at odds with a world which doesn't seem to realise that we're the hero, that it's *our* name above the title, godammit, and nobody else's."

Having gained some insight into Smith's

concerns and approach to writing, I set out to learn more about the writer himself. I'm armed with a little preliminary information from Nicholas Royle: 'Mike is one of the funniest people I know; he's supremely talented, earns praise from world-class writers and, Christ, he's even good looking, in a Kevin Bacon/Jack Dee evil bastard love child sort of way. So you would naturally expect him to be deeply annoying, wouldn't you? Weirdly, he's not. On a personal level, his limitless kindness and preternatural sensitivity are balanced by a reassuringly dogmatic approach to problem solving and untapped depths of bile. He's loyal to friends and generous in his professional life. His moods can swing wildly between morose and miserable; yet his personality is so magnetic it can bring down aircraft'.

Like many writers (including Mark Morris, see TTA30) Smith had a peripatetic childhood. He was born in Cheshire in 1965; moved to the US for seven years; spent a year in South Africa and another in Australia; and returned to the UK – with long and frequent trips abroad – in 1975. So, to what extent did this early experience inform his writing? Does he bring an outsider's perspective to all the places he lives in and writes about?

"I think it has become a key theme in what I do, though it took me a long time to realise this. A childhood like mine will affect people in different ways. Some will hate it, and be left with a feeling of insecurity, others will look back and love it. I'm in the latter

camp, and I believe it had a dual effect. While we were living in these other countries I knew I was different. Some kids like feeling different, some don't. I knew that, theoretically, we 'really' lived somewhere else. England was 'home', even though I'd spent next to no time there. To a degree, then, I was an outsider. But I was also very firmly an *insider*, in that I was there as part of a small and very close family. That family was living within academic environments, which also have their own kind of closeness. Academics are friendly, open people on the whole; they tend to make you feel at home. So I was clearly 'not from around here' but felt as if I belonged nonetheless: and this role of 'privileged outsider' is one that many of my main characters inhabit.

"The really peculiar thing was when we came back to England to live. For a number of years I implicitly believed that I was now 'home'. Later I gradually realised that it didn't feel like this was the case. Though I have an English accent, think and act like a Brit, and am, to all intents and purposes, English – it's in America that I feel most at home."

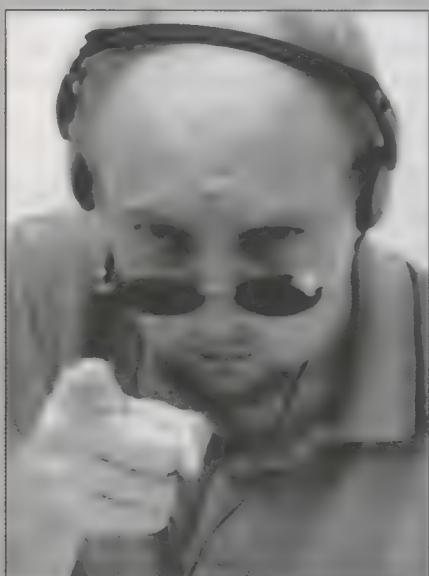
Smith studied Philosophy and Social and Political Science at Cambridge University, writing material for and appearing in the *Footlights* revue. I ask if this academic training has impacted on his work.

"It had one very practical impact. I gained a place to do a PhD, but only got a 2:1 instead of the First I needed, so I found myself burped back out into the world, and having to

work out what I was going to do. If I'd worked a little harder – or spent less time doing comedy with the *Footlights* – I could well have ended up being an academic, which was my first intention. I think I might have been a bit crap at that, especially in the current climate of grant-chasing, performance indicators and teacher-student contracts, so it's probably just as well.

"Philosophy also frees you up a little, I think, by forcing you to realise that there's always more than one truth. I remember an occasion at college where I'd just spent a month learning all about symbolic logic. My brain hurt, but I'd got it. Then the bastard lecturer revealed that all we'd learned was the structure of one particular type of logic, and that there were other, largely contradictory, schemas too. I was aghast. How the blue Christ can there be different ontologies of logic? Luckily it was explained to me over a game of pinball by a guy called Alan Thomas, one of the four other philosophy students in the year. He was a far more gifted philosophy student than I, and his explanation made me realise two things: firstly, that however hard you've thought about something, there will be more to it than you've realised, and secondly that I wasn't going to make a good enough philosopher.

"I would recommend studying a bit of philosophy to anyone who's intending to use their mind later in life. Western philosophy, as taught at universities, has little or nothing to do with the esoteric and new age. It's a



THE DODO HAS LANDED ALLEN ASHLEY

"I always knew there was something a bit funny about him, you know. He kept himself to himself. Never socialised with anyone from rahnd this way. 'E weren't the sort you could chat to in Supasave abaht *Eastenders* and stuff, innit. Like I said, not normal. They should've arrested him years ago, if you ask me. Loners, individuals, free-thinkers, I 'ate 'em, me!"

Modern thinking seems to have become a curious echo of Peter Lorre's immortal line from *Casablanca* in that nowadays the knee-jerk response is to round up the usual suspect: the loner, the guy who lives on his own because, hey man, how weird is that?

It's about time somebody spoke up for the harmless eccentric who doesn't conform to an increasingly narrow range of stereotypes in our apparently civilised modern democracy. The Ford Fiesta advert on the box urges us in its street slang fashion to 'Get Out More', contrasting staying at home microwaving lasagne or playing air guitar with the apparently superior activity of larging it urban style with a bunch of mates. Really? Is that what I want to be doing or is this just a desperate car manufacturer's attempt to promote its particular tin can beyond its usual target market of middle-aged librarians?

Not every psycho killer or dangerous nutter is a solitary cove, you know. Harold Ship-

man is married, Fred West had a wife and children and Charlie Manson had a 'family'. OK, maybe a stalker by necessity is likely to be a loner who probably doesn't have much else in his life. But where do you draw lines between interest, fandom and obsession? Barrie George – the man convicted of killing Jill Dando on somewhat circumstantial evidence – maintained a fascination with the late Freddie Mercury. So, by extrapolation, is everybody who bought 'Bohemian Rhapsody' or who has ever sung along with 'We Are The Champions' under suspicion of being about to shoot a TV personality? How about a friend of mine who is running his own business and is happily married with three children but logged 38 hits on the Brian May website in one month!

One has to be wary of very many parameters – some might say barriers – nowadays so that one stays within the confines of the acceptable. It's OK to book a bargain holiday on the Internet or visit, in a post-ironic fashion, ridiculous sites of the sort favoured by Graham Norton and other trashy self-referential, post-pub TV programmes but those who spend serious time surfing are nerds, nobby no mates. Maybe they are a little sad (in its current or original meaning) but . . . dangerous *per se*?

Because the pressure's on these days in a globalised, homogenised society to con-

rigorous, proof-driven analysis of the way we think and what we can legitimately say we know, and ultimately boils down to a sustained meditation on the structure and nature of language and what we can say with it. I think a little bit of that (though not too much) is probably of great benefit to being a writer. Plus it's fun for dogmatically undermining other people's arguments. Something my wife really, really hates."

Every good story is an emergent property of the collision between the imaginations of writer and reader; but Smith engages his readers in the process of collective dreaming more explicitly than the majority of authors. His work seems to be crammed with games based on the theme of provisional realities. So are the ludic elements of his stories rooted in his training in philosophy, or do things develop in a much more intuitive way than that?

"Um . . . I'd have to opt for the 'much more intuitive' option, to be honest. In some ways I'm quite 'intellectual', in the very limited sense of valuing thought and spending a lot of time doing it; but in others I'm almost aggressively *non*-intellectual. I'm slightly ashamed to say that there's almost no conceptual underpinning to what I do whatsoever. I am dimly aware of the reader when I write, but no more than that. I see my job as coming up with (or finding, more accurately) a story, then setting it down as readably as possible, placing as few barriers as possible in the way. Part of this involves

leaving space for the readers to put themselves in it: not as characters, but as part of a necessarily two-way experience. Only part of writing is about telling: the rest should be about showing. We don't value being told things: we value *experience*. A joke is best told by someone slightly drunk, to a bunch of equally drunk mates, when they're all having fun: chipping in, undermining and refining, making it something that's happening rather than merely recounted. It is from experience that we learn, become and gain enjoyment."

After Cambridge, Smith co-wrote and performed *And Now in Colour* for BBC Radio 4 – a programme I used to listen to while stuck in traffic on Nottingham's outer ring road. So did turning out radio sketches sharpen his ability to write very quickly (something for which he has a reputation)? And would he consider working for radio again?

"Wow – a listener. It's funny: I very, very rarely come across people who say they heard that programme, but my wife was one of them. When we first met, and I admitted that I'd once been part of a comedy team with a series on Radio 4, it turned out she'd been listening too, which was nice. I can't see myself doing any radio work in the near future. It's not that I have no desire to work in the medium – God knows there's some excellent stuff done there, *Hitchhiker's Guide* being a very obvious example – but I have my hands full with the books and screenplays and trying to get a short story done every

now and then. I do tend to work quickly (once I get started, which may take a very long time) and it's possible that the early discipline of banging out sketches might have had something to do with that. I remember co-writing a pantomime one year for the *Footlights* when we were finishing each scene on the morning of the day it was due to be rehearsed; that will tend to sharpen your typing skills, certainly. Writer's block isn't an acceptable excuse when there's a room full of people waiting for lines to say.

"But in the end I doubt that has much to do with it. I'm either not writing well (in which case I hate this bastard job) or I am, in which case I just sit and get it down just as fast as I can."

And what is Smith – and/or Marshall – getting down as fast as he can at the moment?

"I'm writing an original horror movie called *Friends for Ever*. It's based around the idea of imaginary friends: I'm writing it for a British Company called Shine, and a director called Nick Hamm (who directed *The Hole*). I'm also developing a series with the BBC called *CityScape* (built around my own somewhat far-fetched notions about the history of London over the last 2,000 years). And I'm going to be starting a new book soon. Honestly. Just as soon as I can. This will be another Michael Marshall book. After that, perhaps another Michael Marshall Smith . . ."

Talk to Michael Marshall Smith at www.ttawards.com/discuss

form, to fit in. More than ever. Maybe the lessening of belief in old Empire ideals of monarchy, Parliamentary democracy, religious and ethical values and so forth has been replaced, in a corruption of Baby Boomer ideals, by peer pressure. We've all got to wear Nike Air/watch *The West Wing*/go clubbing every Friday with our mates. Or at least aspire to that lifestyle. There's a tangible pressure to belong to gangs or safe subsections and communities which are then subsumed into society as a whole. I trust you all cried over Diana and cooed over baby Leo Blair.

Maybe this is why most pedestrians in London are always on their mobile – see, look at me I'm not really on my own or unpopular, it's just that my friends are all at work/on the piss/on the thief at the moment, honestly.

Of course, the mere fact of being an active reader puts you in a minority. It's a short step from minority to marginality to Loner Town.

It's one of the unresolved – and insoluble? – dynamics of the new century, this conflict between general social consensus and individual freedom: how to have a cohesive/coherent United States of Europe and yet still allow for individual local customs/cuisine etc. Or, if you like, how to create a safe street where you can trust your neighbours

not to burgle your house or abuse your children but still let them indulge an interest in Gregorian chanting or mollusc baiting.

My politics have always been based on the old socialist notion of the greater good for all but as time flies on I admit that my world view has somewhat contracted to a more individual, even solipsistic perception. Empathy is a fine fellow feeling but ultimately I live and think within that special universe inside my own head.

Let's take the stigma out of being alone/doing solitary things. And while we're at it, let's stop the financial penalties, too. Holidays and hotels for single people shouldn't just be about Club Med. And I've yet to hear a convincing argument regarding the single person discount on Council Tax being only 25%. We'd give you a full 50%, pal, 'cause that would be fair except, you know, you being on your own, we think you're more likely to need therapy.

Of course we can all enjoy a sense of belonging and being part of the mainstream. Wear your reversible red/blue England shirt with pride, I say. But don't try and be Brazilian when you don't speak a word of Portuguese and you don't even drink coffee . . .

Speaking of which, I went into a sports shop the other day looking for a pair of goalkeeper gloves (I'm shit in goal, by the way, but I wanted to make the effort to at

least look the part). They didn't have any. Their idea of sports wear was swooshed T-shirts and great down the bus shelter jogging pants. Plenty of hooded tops, too, because even if you aren't a teenage mugger you've got to look hard enough on the streets so you don't get hassled.

Yes, I know that marriage/cohabitation patterns are in flux and that people are often choosing to stay single for longer than they did in our parents' generation – and sometimes there's no element of choice, believe me – but still it's OK as long as they've visibly got plenty of mates. Every time I log on to Hotmail they post up an advert for 'U Date' complete with a picture of a Kylie-esque girl – not quite as sensational as all those chat line TV ads with glowing girls in bras just waiting for your call, I agree. Anyway, it suggests: hey it's great fun being single! But the difference is, of course, singles date whereas the only date a loner will ever get is with a police officer/psychiatric social worker.

So let's resist conformity and group activity. Reclaim the right to be a loner. Sing along with Sartre: "Hell? It is other people." For proof you only need catch a glimpse of those dysfunctional fuckers on *Big Brother*.

Talk back to The Dodo on TTA's new interactive forum. Go to www.ttawards.com and click on 'message boards'.

When he asked her, she said: "A car, wasn't it? Or was it a bus?" There was a little smear of mayonnaise on her mouth and her hair was scrunched like dead spiders' legs at the back, where she had not been able to see it to comb in the mirror. Graham had parked the car by a pub, The Britannia, that overlooked the flat, greasy edge of sea. Inside he had bought them halves of bitter. The barmaid seemed preoccupied, unable to look them in the eye when he ordered. The only other couple were sitting at a table inspecting a camera.

"Don't you remember resting your hand on mine? On the gear lever?"

Julia looked at him as if he had asked her to perform an indecent act. Maybe, in asking her to remember, he had. He watched her as she moved her glass on the table, spreading rings of moisture across the cracked varnish. He could smell beef and onion crisps, smoke from the little train that travelled between Hythe and Dungeness, and an underlying tang; the faint whiff of seawater.

"Can you - " he began, but stopped himself. Her answers didn't matter anymore. He didn't know how long they should stay here. He didn't know how long it would take.

Three months ago, he didn't need to mash her food for her or accompany her up and down the stairs. She wouldn't slur his name or regard him with a lazy eye. "Where are we?" she said, one Sunday morning as he re-entered the bedroom with a tray of tea and toast. "I don't know where we are."

He sipped his beer. It tasted sour, as if what had filled it previously had not been properly purged from the glass. The symptoms of brain cancer - or *glioblastoma multiforme* as the specialist revealed to them (with an unwelcome flourish, as if he were introducing an unusual item on a menu) - are headaches and lethargy, seizures, weakness and motor dysfunction, behaviour changes and unorthodox thought processes. This form of cancer, the specialist said, was particularly aggressive. If it were a dog, it would be a *toza inu*.

"I don't want the rest of us," she said, pushing her drink to one side. "In bastes faddy."

He rubbed her knuckles, white and papery, and tried to smile. "It's okay," he said. "Come on."

Outside they headed towards the sea, compelled by an unspoken mutual need. She was not to know that he had been here before, many years ago. She just wanted to see the ocean one more time before her sight deteriorated. He allowed her to lean on him and they went slowly over the uneven shingle; it didn't matter. Time had lost its meaning. Time was nothing anymore other than now and the next thing. 'Next week' was as alien to his vocabulary as a phrase of Russian.

The tide was a long way out, visible only as a seam of pale grey that stitched the lead of the sky to the dun of the beach. Fishing boats trapped on the shingle faced the sea, their bows raised as if impatient to return. Explosions of static from their communication radios made her start. She moved into the collapsed light as though immersing herself. The air was thick here. It seemed to coat the beach. Her footsteps in the shingle beat at the friable crust of his mind and in the shape of her progress, the delicacy of her step, he saw how near the end was.

The sea was affecting the light in some subtle way that he had not recognised before. It erased an area above the horizon, a band of vague ochre that she would stare at during the moments when she stopped to rest, as if it might contain

THE MACHINE COMING UPON US



words, or the barest outline of them, some code to unpick. An explanation. Around them, the beach slowly buried its secrets. Great knots of steel cable, an anchor that had lost its shape through the accretion of oxidant, cogs so large they might well drive the Earth's movement. All of it was slowly sinking into the endless shingle.

Us too, he thought, blithely. If we don't keep moving.

"He isn't here," she said, panic creeping into her voice.

"He'll come," he insisted. "He'll come. He always does."

"You saib he would be fere."

She wasn't going to be pacified. He was tiring, and sat back against one of the drifts of shingle, watched her move away from him, a gently wailing wraith in black clothes that were now too big for her. He lost her for moment, against the distant flutter of black flags on the boats, and when she re-emerged, it was to drop, exhausted, to the stones. He hoped she would be able to sleep, at least for a little while.

A wind was rising, drawing white flecks to the crest of the waves. It was getting rough out there. Small fishing boats tipped and waggled on the surf, bright and tiny against the huge expanses of cobalt pressing in all around them. Behind him, urgent bursts of white noise from the radios wrapped voices that nobody received. The deserted boats looked too blasted by salt and wind to be up to the task of setting sail for dab, pout and whiting.

An elderly couple picked their way through the shingle, hunting for sponges perhaps, or other similarly useless booty. All he remembered seeing on these beaches were rotting fish-heads and surgical gloves, thin, mateless affairs flapping in



the stones like milky, viscous sea-creatures that had been marooned by the quick tides. The couple reached Julia, then passed her by, giving her a wide berth.

He hauled himself out of the shingle, noticing how the flinty chips had crept over the toes of his shoes; always the beach was in the process of sucking under, of burying. He tried to understand the motivation for building on something so unsubstantial: the sheds and houses dotting the beach were grim little affairs, colourless, uninviting, utilitarian in the extreme.

He caught up with Julia; she looked withdrawn to the point of translucence. Her skin was a taut, grey thing that shone where her bones emerged. Salt formed white brackets around her mouth. The shingle had shifted across her boots, completely concealing her feet. He gently drew her upright and picked the strands of hair away from her eyes. Her scalp gleamed palely through a scant matting that had once been thick, black and silky. When she opened her eyes though, everything else became superfluous. He felt scorched by her gaze, as he had for the past twenty years. Even with her flesh failing so quickly, she could not be anything other than beautiful if she had strength enough to open her eyes and look around her.

"Are you hungry?"

She shook her head. "Where is he?"

He smiled. "You've always been impatient, haven't you? I told you he doesn't come till dark. We've got an hour yet. At least."

"I want to walk," she said, looking around her as if assessing the landscape for the first time.

"You sure you aren't too tired?" he said. "Okay. Come on."

They trudged up the beach, the strange, stunted vegetation like hunks of dried sponge or stained blotting paper trapped between the stones: sea campion, kale, Babington's orache. Angling towards the row of weatherboard cottages that lined the Dungeness Road he looked back to the great hulk of the gas-cooled reactors of the power station. Maybe they were causing the sizzle in the air, or perhaps it was the taut lines of the fishermen, buzzing with tension as lugworm and razor clam were cast far beyond the creaming tides. He told Julia that special grilles had been constructed over the cold water intake pipes for the reactors because seals kept being drawn into them. She nodded and shook her head. One eye was squeezed shut, her lank hair swung about her lowered face. A vein in her temples reminded him of mould in strong blue cheese. The colour of decay. Nature consuming itself. He reached for her hand but she snatched it away as if burnt.

They toured the strange, attractive garden at Prospect Cottage where he took a picture of her standing by a circular pattern of stones that were adorned with pieces of coloured glass and a single, brilliant white crab's claw. A rusting, battered trumpet had been nailed to the back door but it was so deteriorated, he couldn't tell if it was the right way up. Though the day was overcast, it had a dry, scorched smell and the air was unpleasantly metallic in his mouth, as if he had pressed a spoon against his fillings.

The previous time he had been here – the only other time – had been with his school on a field trip as part of his geography course. The teacher who accompanied them, Mr Wilson, spoke with what Fudgey, his best mate, had said was an 'X-rated lisp'. His sibilants weren't so much softened as slurred. He always sounded drunk and though the boys had

suspected he might be, they never smelled any booze on him; only the musty depth of the tweed that he wore or stale pipe smoke. Mint imperials.

"It's because he's missing a few teeth on his top set," one of the more liberal teachers explained, when Fudgey had been overheard mimicking him. "You should see him trying to eat a banana. I have to leave the staff room."

Mr Wilson was more interested in birdspotting than the shape and behaviour of the land. At lunch one day, he had taken some of the more interested boys with him – squeezed into his beige Rover – to the reservation and passed around binoculars that smelled of the clothes he wore. He pointed out garganey and greenshank and Balearic shearwater. On the way back, he allowed the boys half an hour on the beach while he went to post some letters and make a phone call. "You can take off your ties but leave your blazers on. This isn't a holiday. You are still representing your school."

"You are shhhhtill refreshhhenting your shhhhcholo," Fudgey intoned, spot on. "Refreshhenting my arshhe, more like."

They kicked about in the shingle and threw stones at the half-submerged gears and cogs and bolts. They agreed that this is what the world would be like after America and the Soviets swapped H-bombs. Merce found a fish-head and forced it on to the end of a stick then chased Beppo around – "Snog it! Snog it Beppo! Snog the fish, you fishy-faced pissant!" – until he was crying. Fudgey and Graham broke away from the other three boys and headed towards the water. A naturally formed ledge gave way to a steep slope of shingle. At the edge, they could see what had been concealed from them until two or three feet away from where the land sank towards the water.

The woman was on her knees, her jacket and blouse discarded. Her bra was lost for a moment against the shocking white of her flesh. She was weeping, trying to cut into the skin of her forearms with a piece of shingle. To her right, his back to her desperation, a man in a panama hat was sitting cross-legged in a deck chair, smoking a cigarette as he watched the horizon. All the boys could see of him was a fat, neatly barbered nape bulging over a collar; the merest edge of brow.

"Lovely view," Fudgey said, a little queasily. "Let's get back to the car."

"Wait," Graham said, but he couldn't explain what it was he wanted them to wait for. After a while, Fudgey's insistent tugging at his elbow broke through his fascination and he allowed himself to be led away.

The following day, the final day of their week in Dungeness, Mr Wilson gave them another period of free time. Fudgey wanted to play football, but Graham declined, explaining that he had a headache and just wanted to go for a walk on his own, to clear his mind. He made his way back to the spot on the beach where they had seen the woman. The deck chair was still there. Where she had been kneeling, he found a smooth, glistening curve of steel buried in the shingle. He dug at it a little, moving away the stones from each side until he had unearthed a disc as large as a train's wheel. What looked like caterpillar tracks, clean and freshly oiled, snaked around the wheel and deep into the ground. As hard as he pulled, Graham couldn't budge it. He saw too, once he rocked back on to his heels, breathing hard with the exertion, how some of the stones were spattered with black spots of blood.



He stopped at a hot dog stall on his way back to the Bed and Breakfast and ordered a Coke and a packet of ready salted crisps. It was only as he was handing over the money to the woman that he recognised her.

"Hello," he said, and his voice cracked on the second syllable like a recording on perished tape. The woman regarded him as if he were a retard; rightly so, he realised. Hellos were gambits, usually, not something you said when you were about to be on your way.

"Sorry," he explained. "I saw you on the beach yesterday. You were – "

"I know what I was doing," she hissed, her eyes flicking away from his to scan their immediate surroundings. She came down the few steps at the rear of the van and grabbed him by the collar. Her cuff slid away from her wrist a little as she dragged him inside and he saw a pinkish bandage pinned tightly around her forearm. She closed the door and bolted it, unclasped the latch that kept the serving hatch opened. It was very hot inside, and heavy with the smells of enthusiastically recycled cooking oil and raw onions. Graham fed crisps into his mouth, trying hard not to appear frightened.

"Would you like some Coke?" he asked, offering her the unopened tin. She slapped it from his hands. He stopped eating and neatly closed the bag with a few twists.

"I'm sorry," she said, her voice gusting from her collapsed mouth like heat from an oven. She tousled his hair and sat on her stool, pinching the bridge of her nose between her fingers. "He said that I would have an answer before nightfall tonight. The wheels had been greased, he said. He said that the technology, though old, was of a perfection you would not find anywhere else. Ancient technology. He told me that it wasn't certain if it had been made by man or not."

She snorted, a sudden, bitter sound that was devoid of any laughter she might have meant for it. "Anyway, I don't care about that. As long as it brings him back to me." She stared intently at Graham. "My husband," she said, spicily, as if it were obvious. "A sweet, sweet man. He would help anybody. Stupid, lovely man."

Her left hand had moved to her forearm and worried at the bandage. The pinkness at its core deepened. Graham stared at the bolt on the door. He retrieved his can of Coke and pulled the ring opener. Beige froth fizzed out over his hand. The woman didn't pay him any attention. It was as if the memory of what had happened to her husband numbed her to extraneous sensation.

"There was a car on a dual carriageway. The A12 going north, towards Ipswich. A nasty bitch of a night. Wind. Rain. So hard it was coming at you side on. The car hit the central reservation and went out of control. End over end job. Came to a stop in the middle of the road. Eddie, my husband, and me, we were about a hundred yards behind. He pulled over and put his hazard lights on, ran over to help. I sat there because we were on our way to a party and I didn't want to get my hair wet. I'd just had it done, especially.

"Seconds later he was hit by a Ford Mondeo doing ninety miles an hour. Do you know . . . the force of the impact knocked him out of his shoes. Lace-ups. And they pinched him a little, those shoes. He was always going on about them, how he ought to get another pair."

Graham rubbed the back of his hand across his mouth. The saltiness of the crisps had made his lips sore. "What happened

on the beach?" he asked.

The woman closed her eyes and then clenched them even tighter, as if the darkness behind them was not deep enough. "You don't need to know anything. I'm sorry you saw it. I didn't mean to upset you."

"Who was that man?"

By degrees she relaxed. Her eyes reopening, she reached behind her to unbolt the door. "You can go," she said, and her voice was soft and likeable now.

"Was he your boyfriend?" Graham asked.

The trace of a smile. She shook her head and then she frowned. "Yes," she said. "I suppose he was, after a fashion."

"I don't remember how I got back to the Bed and Breakfast."

"Sorry?"

They were sitting on a bench watching the colours in the sky warp as the sun ground itself out against the black mass of the power station. Julia's skin was stippled from the cold; what colour it had enjoyed now thinned to that of cooked chicken, but she refused Graham's jacket when he offered it to her.

"I was just remembering," he said, turning his face away from hers, "the first time I came here. With the school."

"Where was I?"

"I didn't know you then. We didn't meet for another fifteen years."

"Were you seeing someone else?"

Graham watched the edge of the sun slip behind the reactors. Parts of the sky were green. The sunsets here were always spectacular.

"No, Jules. I was only fourteen."

She giggled. "You were neber fourteej."

The last three of the day-trippers that had come to Dungeness for a dose of stinging surreality got into their Ford Focus and backed out of the pub car park. They all turned to look out of their windows as they trundled past the bench, their faces partially eclipsed by the oily flash of weak streetlamps on the glass.

"How are you feeling?" he asked.

"It could be workse," she said. "I mean, God, I could have a brain tuzour."

He drew Julia gently upright and kissed the top of her head. Sometimes, when she slept, he would nuzzle her hair, enjoying the clean, warm smell of her scalp. He endured a second or two of real panic when he thought of her gone, her and her unique smell, and it seemed more unspeakable, for a moment, that he might not be able to recall her scent rather than the way she spoke or talked or touched him.

"We should go now," he said. "He might be here."

The strange buzzing noise persisted, though it was not so much in his ears anymore as deep within him, like the thrum one feels in the chest at a rock concert. It was as if the vibrations were rising from the stones themselves and, if he trained his view on the trembling shoreline, they appeared to writhe in the gloaming, pretending to be the leading edge of a tide long retreated.

He makes things perfect she had said, all those years ago. He had come across her one more time, on the morning of their departure. She was sitting in a bus shelter and the gin was coming off her in sharp waves, like the poisonous veils of a deep sea fish repelling unwanted attention.

Well, not so much him as the beach he tends, and what lies

beneath it. Even before him, before there was that stretch of Kent, before the stones and the sea, even, there was something that moved and rotated and ticked off the seconds, and all the while it was rusting and seizing up. Like an old person. Exactly like an old person.

Her eyes, when she looked up at him, were clownishly large, filmed with tears.

But it won't die. My husband came back to me last night. The tears in his body, they were all gone, like he had zipped them up, as easy as that. He's . . . he's perfect. But I'm scared of what perfection means.

He had gone back to the bus, his mind burning with her words. How, as a child, she had watched two girls playing in the surf. And one had been sucked out by a surge of water. And the other girl had been crying and somehow, minutes later, managed to grasp hold of her limp, outstretched arm and pull her from the water. They had lain together on the stones, one of them heaving and wailing, the other as still as the beached fishing boats that gathered shadows beneath their cracked, peeling bows.

She had stared at them for an age, while everything surrounding the girls, everything beyond her focus, seethed and blurred and warped. And she had blinked and the girls had risen and walked away up the beach, their hands linked, laughing, laughing, with wet hair and the white impressions of the stones on their legs and arms. She found a highly polished lever, brassy with oil, sticking out of the stones where they had lain. When she tried to move it, she felt a deep ratcheting under her toes and the lever sank out of sight.

There was a deckchair on the beach now, the alternating white stripes of its ballooned fabric like ghostly ribs floating above the ground. Graham smelled cigarette smoke and thought he could see a pulsing coal hovering a little way to the right of the chair.

"I'm tired, Gray," Julia said. He removed his jacket and pressed her back into the pebbles, cushioning her head, which looked tiny and white and punched in with two many dark holes and shadows. There was a moon low in the sky, like an albino's eyelash. What light there was came from the stars, or the ineffectual blocks of orange in the pub windows. A great arm of rusted steel reached out of the stones further up the beach, the hinges where its elbow might had long been gritted up with salt and time. Perhaps it was a crane, or a digger, a model of which he had enthusiastically played with as a boy. He had seen other heavy plant around the beach at Dungeness, silent, slowly being subsumed by the stones, like mammoths caught in tar. Nothing moved here, but change was constant.

Graham approached the figure. "Do you look after the beach?" he asked. The man looked no different, despite the intervening years. When he turned around, Graham could not meet his eyes. The mouth wore a sweet smile and he inclined his head towards the chair. Graham went to sit down, but saw that the man intended for him to take what was lying there. He picked the stone up and moved away. Behind him, the creak of the deck chair and the rasp of a match.

"Here?" he called. "Is here okay?" There was no reply. The sound of the sea was almost lost to distance now. There was the barest whisper, but that might well have been his own breath, hurrying on his lips as he bared his arm to a beach that suddenly seemed to whiten, as if the moisture on the

pebbles had evaporated in an instant.

The stone in his fingers felt warm and familiar. It had been honed, and he pressed the edge against his skin. Beneath him ran a tremor, from the north end of the beach to the south. The pebbles chuckled as they realigned themselves. When the blood came, Graham looked up at the night sky and waited. Despite the wheeling areas of nothing at his shoulders, he had never felt so smothered. After a little while he was able to return his attention to the wound. Blood tigered his arm. It had drizzled the patch of stones by his foot. From somewhere, what looked like spark plugs and the teeth of a partially concealed cog had emerged. They gleamed in the subtle light, sharp fresh, it seemed, oiled, primed for use. Infinitesimally, the cog turned. He heard Julia shift in the stones, a couple of metres away but he could not see any detail in the black shape she made.

He thought of the woman, and her failed attempts to perfect her husband. Unlike the girl she had witnessed on the beach, he was too far removed from what it was to be human. All that had happened was that his injuries had been bettered, had reached a sublime point that could not be bested by the crude materials that had served him previously.

Perfection, he could see now, never had to mean something good.

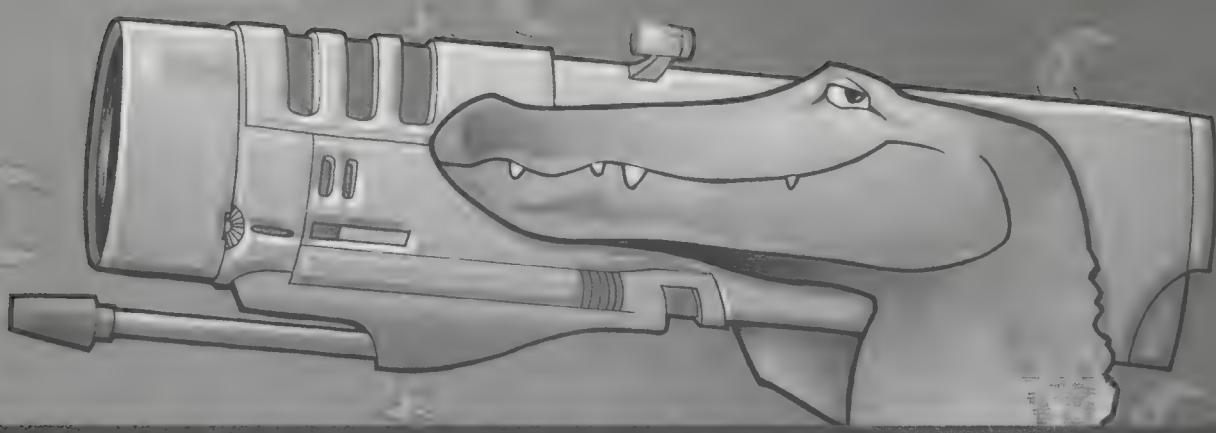
The man in the deckchair had gone. The pebbles shifted again. Graham's feet were buried in them. He felt something mesh with the leather of his shoes. A metallic taste filled his mouth. A chain had wound itself around his hand and was binding the muscles of his arm. Blood coursed along the links, oil-black in the night. Where was the difference here? He was soft and it was hard, but they were both machines, in the end. Machines needed other people in order to work properly. An hour, two hours later, his body hardened by fatigue and the attentions of the machine, Graham, by degrees, felt himself being released.

He remembered how he had thought the machinery was slowly being buried. How he had attributed its sounds to other things. He had been wrong in so many other aspects of his life that to be mistaken now was hardly unexpected. He trudged over to the shockingly small shape of his wife. He held her close to him, feeling her bones through the twill of his jacket. When he heard Julia's breath leave her body, the tired echo of the surf collapsing on the stones, that too came as no surprise. He watched the sky at the horizon slowly flood with colour. The sun would rise before long but he didn't need it to be able to see the shining grid of machinery pumping and gyrating across the beach. For a little while it seemed rejuvenated, super-real like an image manipulated by computers. He watched until spent, it grew still. The stones shifted and soon there were just the occasional glimpses of gears and pistons, as it was when he had arrived many years ago.

Like Julia, the beach was striving for perfection. Unlike her, it had yet to attain it. She was real to him and yes, even beautiful in the dawn. The smell of her was deep in him, of him. He would not forget. A part of her, at least, was perfect now.

Conrad Williams was born in Cheshire in 1969. He is the author of the novels *Head Injuries* and *Nearly People*, and his short stories have most recently appeared in *Cemetery Dance*, *The Spook*, *Phantoms of Venice*, *The Museum of Horrors* and *Crimewave 6: Breaking Point*. He is working on a crime novel called *Blonde on a Stick*.





PUTTING AWAY CHILDISH THINGS BY JOHN AEGARD

MONDAY

Anyone could've started the final war; Fireman Geoff or Pullstring Pterodactyl or even one of the plastic pawns from the old *Monster Attack* boardgame. But of course it was Alligator. Alligator was the most unlucky of all toys, because he was fearsome and toothy and his mouth was painted on so he couldn't talk. He could only shake his head, and when he did, his tail wagged along in creaky plastic sync. It was an odd mix of movement, both yes and no, both puppydog wag and snarly headshake.

Alligator recognised his unluckiness, so he didn't leave the toy chest very often, just once in awhile for a swim. But Monday was special. Monday was parade day, and not just any parade day, either – it was the last one, ever, as non-optional an event as Alligator could imagine. Everyone from Robot down to the forgotten rubber bugs who lived under the folds at the bottom of the chest – everyone except for Alligator, of course – had been arranged in perfect formation and were standing by to march under Penguin's shelf.

So Alligator reluctantly trundled out of the empty toy chest and set out to find a place for himself. He wound up near the front, near Robot. Robot was the Parade Master. To show it, he had a little gold-speckled sash draped over his fishbowl head. He also had the *Stanley Academy New Cadet's Orientation Manual* spread out in front of him. The *Orientation Manual* was an inch-thick stack of poorly dittoed paper, wrapped in a vinyl cover. Robot had parked himself over the spine, holding it open to 'Appendix K: Parades'.

"Al-li-ga-tor-do-you-want-to-be-in-the-par-ade-to-day?" Robot asked.

Alligator shook his head and wagged his tail.

Robot wasn't sure what to do, so he consulted the *Orientation Manual*. "You-will-have-to-go-a-way-then," he said, after reading. "I-am-re-spon-si-ble-for-the-grounds-you-are-in-the-way." Springs creaked as Robot gestured over the assembled paraders. There was a circus train and an elephant and a fire engine and a big yellow steel bulldozer.

Alligator shook his head, more vigorously this time. His wagging tail slammed into a little green car, sending it flying. Alligator was much bigger than a little car.

Robot rolled over to the car and had a look at it. "The-wind-shi-el-d-is-bro-ken," he announced. "You-broke-the-car. Are-you-sor-ry?" Robot knew that neither the shaking head nor the wagging tail meant an apology. "Well-go-a-way-then!"

Alligator turned away, but his wagging tail tickled old Elephant, who trumpeted and ran. Twenty little cars were in Elephant's path, bumper-to-bumper, unable to move. None of them escaped; they were all flattened to thin steel wafers, except for the wheels, which popped off and skittered away.

Alligator shook and wagged, hoping he could get Elephant's attention and calm the big animal down. He didn't. Robot had to shoot Elephant with his sparklegun. When Elephant fell, he landed on a tiny plastic girl from Traintown.

Alligator slunk back to the chest, chased away by Robot's monotone protests.

And high above, Porcelain Penguin growled.

Penguin ruled from his shelf, way up high where no one could reach him. He had ruled since the day he'd been placed on his perch. He was shiny and glazy and never dusty, with big eyes and little wings which were folded over his tummy. And he was an expert reader of the *New Cadet's Orientation Manual*.

After Alligator fled, he opened it to a page he knew well, and started reading.

The naive preach of a world in which the concepts of good and evil have been rendered obsolete.

Everyone looked up at him.

"There will be no parade," he said, finally. "Because of this evil attack, we'll have to have a war."

No one argued. Penguin immediately began to build an Anti-Alligator Army.

First, he ordered construction of an attack fighter fleet. His fighters were simple ships; two eight-pip Legos laid in a T-shape, then capped with a four-pip square. Five squadrons were made, identified by the colour of their capbrick. White squadron, blue squadron, red squadron, black squadron, yellow squadron.

To keep work running quickly, Porcelain Penguin occasionally read relevant passages from the *Orientation Manual*:

Teamwork is represented by the bridge on the Stanley crest. The team player will be valued both professionally and personally.

The fighters were laid out in neat rows inside a Tinkertoy hangar. Around the hangar, a big circle of assorted figures – firemen, bakers, motorcycle riders, and musketeers – had been arranged. They were serving as guards, in case Alligator tried attacking right away.

The construction was a long job, requiring much rooting around for spare components, and it was not done until nearly lights-out. Penguin knew that this was when Alligator came out for his swims, so he called for SAM, the Sea-Action Man.

"This is volunteer duty. You can refuse," Penguin told SAM.

"Why would I do that?" asked SAM.

"The tub is off-limits for everyone but Alligator. You'll have to sneak in."

"I'm small. I can sneak into the tub."

"You could go down the drain."

"I have a grappling hook," SAM pointed out.

"You'll have to carry your harpoon gun and your swimming torpedo. You won't have room for any other of your tools."

SAM's back stiffened. "This is my job, Mr Penguin, sir."

"Excellent. Here's what I want . . ."

Swimming was the best part of Alligator's life. None of the others could go in the tub – the water would be fatal for Robot, it would rust the cars and rot the other animals. And the drain would suck down anyone smaller than he was. The tub was his to own and rule, his private kingdom and refuge.

He was so relaxed that he didn't notice SAM.

The fearless Action Man dove from the soap dish, slipping into the water without a splash. He let himself fall to the pale white bottom of the tub, knowing that the correcting fluid that had been applied to his wetsuit would camouflage him.

When Alligator was directly above him, SAM attacked. He clicked his swimtrop to fast, rocketed upwards, and thrust his harpoon into the crack between Alligator's neck and his shoulder – the only vulnerable part of Alligator's plastic body.

Surprised and terrified, Alligator twisted. The harpoon snapped, leaving a plastic wedge lodged inside him. One of his thrashing claws knocked SAM's swimtrop. It skittered out of SAM's grasp and clunked against the tub's side. Suddenly, SAM's equipment was very heavy. He flailed, trying to stay afloat, and for the first time, Alligator saw him.

He watched SAM struggle for a few moments, then swam to the bottom of the tub and removed the plug from the drain.

From the centre of the drain, a vortex rose. It grabbed hold of SAM and dragged him downward. He managed to hook a hand on the edge of the drain briefly, but could not hang on; he vanished with a clunk and a slurp.

As the water level fell, Alligator thrashed and splashed, trying to knock the harpoon tip free. It wouldn't come loose, and the way it was jammed inside him stopped both his head from shaking and his tail from wagging.

Finally, resigning himself to pain and paralysis, he dried himself off and went home. But he didn't sleep in the toy chest. Instead, he crawled under the bed, into the dustiest, most sheltered part of his world, and he waited for lights-out there.

After lights-out, Penguin read some more from the *Stanley Academy New Cadet's Orientation Manual*. He had no difficulty seeing the faint purple letters under the glow of the room's night light; being from Antarctica, he had superb night vision.

We strongly recommend that cadets bring the bare minimum of personal possessions with them. In particular, toys such as stuffed animals, pocket electronic games, crayons, water pistols, and dominoes are discouraged. Your boy will not accrue the maximum benefit from our program if he is supplied with distractions from home. If such toys interfere with the program, they will be confiscated.

"It's a good thing I'm not a toy," whispered Penguin.

TUESDAY

Alligator didn't know how he knew, but he was certain – someone was under the bed with him.

At first, he lay still and hoped that whatever it was would go away. It didn't. It got louder, and buzzed constantly in the back of his plastic brain. It sounded like a girl, talking through a fan.

Finally, he decided to investigate, and crept deeper under the bed.

The voice cleared. "Hello?" it said, and he jumped.

"It's okay, it's okay!" she said, sounding a little frightened.

He could see her now, against the back of the cave, laying face-down under a light coating of dust. She was tall, slender, plastic. She had tangled blonde hair and a violet jumpsuit.

"Hello," she said, and then Alligator noticed that the sound was appearing in his head, quietly and with a bit of an echo, like when the kitchen television and the living room one were tuned to the same channel.

"I have a mind-reading implant," she said.

"Hello?" he whispered in his head. It was the first word he'd ever said to anyone.

"I'm Jamie. Yes, I can hear you."

"Alligator." He held out a foreleg for her to shake.

She didn't respond. She remained frozen in the dust.

"Are you hurt?" he thought.

"Ouch! Not so loud!"

Alligator backed away.

"That's okay. I'm sorry."

"I'm new at talking," he said. "Why are you in the dust? Are you hurt?"

"Peel up one of my sleeves, I'll show you."

He worked one of his claws under the near sleeve of her jumpsuit. It ripped, tearing up the seam.

"I'm sorry – "

"Don't worry about it. Look at my arm." It had a hollow slot right above the elbow. "My bionic modules are supposed to go there, but I lost them. Can you roll me over?"

He did, as gently as he could, then wiped the dust off her face with the broad edge of a forelimb.

"It only hurts," she said, in response to his unasked question, "when I wish I could go somewhere."

"I can take you," he said, but he regretted it instantly.

Her brain-voice rose excitedly. "Can you?"

"No, wait, we shouldn't. Penguin might see us."

"Penguin?" she asked.

She'd been under the bed since before Penguin had appeared, so she'd never heard of him. Alligator told her the whole story, about the parade and SAM's attack.

"That's awful."

"And it's not just SAM," Alligator said. "Penguin's building a whole army." He sighed. "I just don't know why there needs to be a war. Everything's changing anyway. Why do we need a war too?"

Jamie's voice was almost a murmur. "It's okay if you don't want to go out with me."

Something jumped up in Alligator's memory. "Wait. I just thought of something."

"What?" Jamie asked.

"I'll be right back!"

Alligator turned and ran towards the edge of the underbed.

Penguin's patrols had started at dawn. Two by two, his attack fighters were manoeuvred in circles around the room, scanners on full, probing for Alligator. When their power ran low they went and hovered underneath Penguin and radioed in their reports. Even the fighters, with their advanced rockets, could not fly high enough to reach Penguin's shelf.

Alligator watched them circle from the edge of the underbed. They did not see him. Their scanners appeared unable to penetrate into his hiding place.

His eyes fell on the toy chest, directly across the room. Jamie's modules were in that chest. He'd lived at its bottom for years; he'd seen them a dozen times. They were tiny cubes of crystal, shot through with red and green circuitry. He could get them for her, and they could be friends –

Two fighters buzzed overhead. Alligator jumped back. They moved so fast! He hadn't heard them coming.

His eyes followed them as they crossed to the far side of the room, to report to Penguin.

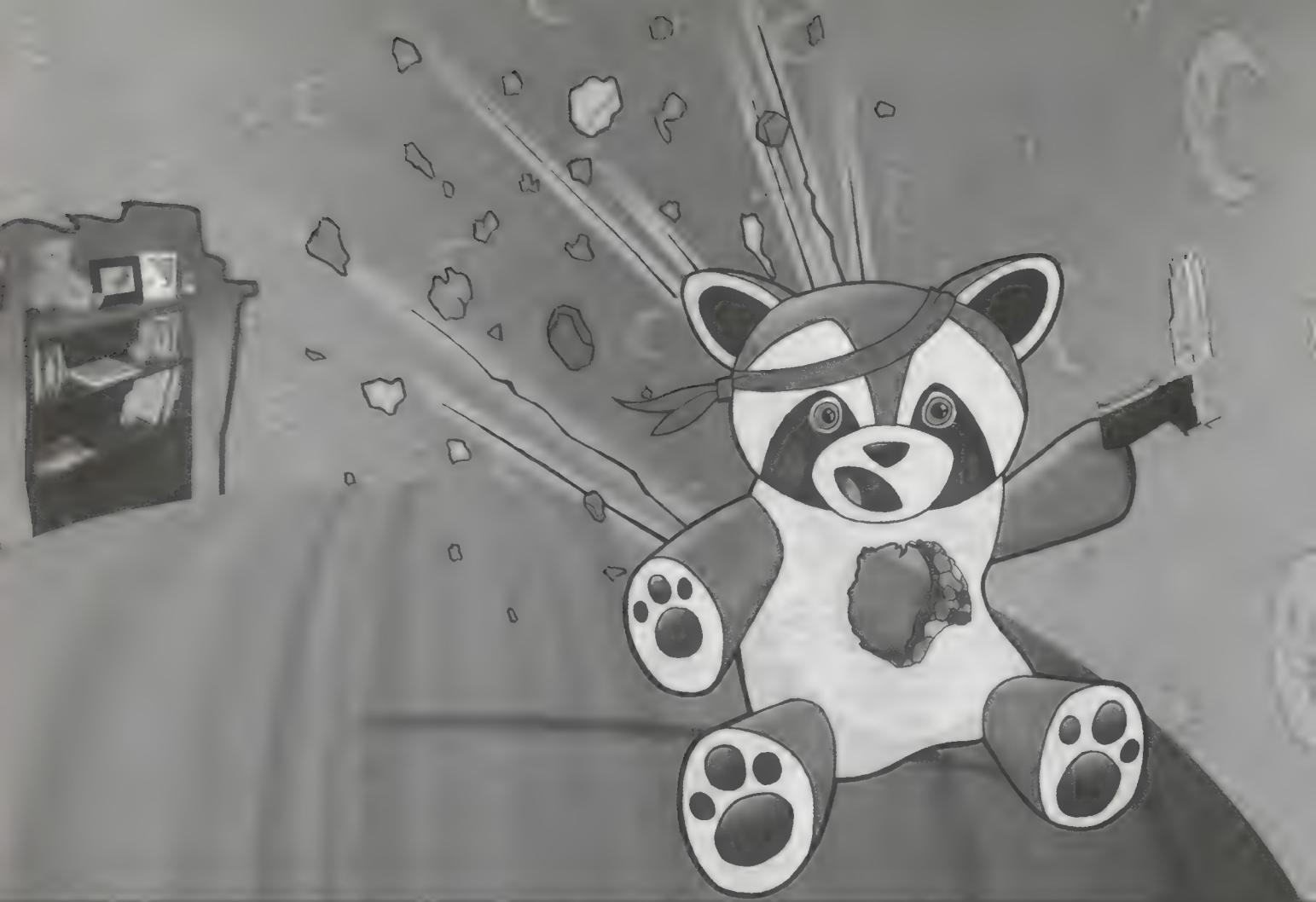
Now's my chance!

He galloped.

"There!" Penguin shouted.

Black-Delta flipped his fighter around. When he saw Alligator, he forgot about his nearly empty fuel tank. He switched to emergency backup reserve power and dove for the kill.

Red crosshairs appeared on his fighter's scope, fixed on Alligator's back. His thumb found the firing button on his control stick.



HE OPENED FIRE, ZAPPING WHOLE ROWS OF THEM AT A TIME. EXPOSED TO THE AWESOME CANNONS' FULL BLAST, SOME OF THEM EXPLODED INTO SHARDS, OTHERS MELTED

Laserbolts stitched across the floor, vaporizing tiny holes in its varnish, then walking up and over Alligator.

"He's still going!" called Black-Beta, who'd attacked right behind him. Delta checked his readout. His wingman was right – Alligator's tough plastic skin had resisted the attack!

"Execute link-up manoeuvre!" he ordered.

"Roger," said Beta.

The two fighters snapped together, with Delta on top. Linked, they made another pass, and this time, their joint weaponry fired a continuous beam, which carved a black line into the hardwood.

Just as it touched Alligator's tail, the beam flickered out. "Power zero," reported Black-Beta.

"Torpedo-missiles!" replied Black-Delta

Unpowered, gliding, the fighters rolled onto their backs. Their Lego pips flowered open. Missiles streaked down from them like backwards fireworks.

"Fuel gone! I'm ejecting!" yelled Black-Beta, as soon as his missiles were launched. His four-dot cockpit brick activated its escape rocket and jumped safely away from his falling fighter.

Black-Delta stayed in his cockpit to watch his missiles explode. As they did, Alligator sprang towards the toy chest. The blast from the missiles caught him and blew him towards his destination.

"You're good, Alligator," Black-Delta whispered.

"Bail out! Bail out!" Beta shouted.

Delta looked up, but the hardwood was coming up fast. His fighter crashed, and parts flew in three directions.

Alligator landed nose down in the toy chest. He'd been hurt all over; little sharp hurts from the laserbolts and a nasty long one across his tail from the beam. Little whiffs of smoke rose from his wounds.

He ignored the pain and started rooting through the box. The other toys lay still – probably too scared to move, he figured – as he burrowed through them. Occasionally he ran into the flattened remnants of a parade car. Those was Elephant's fault, he told himself. But still, he felt bad.

He kept searching.

With Alligator cornered in the toy chest, Penguin decided to look after some business.

The first priority was to honour the casualties. This he did by reading from 'Appendix B: Services' of the *Cadet's Orientation Manual*.

Let us reflect upon the enormous love that these men carried in their hearts, that they would place the good of society above all else, even their own lives. Now they wait for us in the land of rewards. No sorrow, only joy. No defeat, only victory.

The reading was followed by a presentation of medals. Construction-paper replicas of the General Stanley Award For Outstanding Service had been constructed for SAM and Black-Delta. Black Squadron accepted the medal on behalf of their fallen comrade. The award was Penguin's size, so it was much bigger than they were, but they proudly linked up their fighters and flew it around the room anyway.

No one volunteered to accept SAM's award – he was sort of a loner – so it was pinned to the wall for all to share.

On his last patrol before lights-out, Red-Beta spied Alligator. He was lumbering across the floor, towing some kind of trailer.

"I have him," Red-Beta reported. "Shall I – "

"It's too close to lights-out," radioed Penguin.

Red-Beta thought of poor Black-Delta, and his trigger finger tightened.

"Return to base, Red-Beta," Penguin said, before Beta could fire. "That's an order."

"I've got a surprise for you," Alligator said to Jamie. Hope was fountaining through her like Christmas; he could feel it.

He snapped the bionic cube he'd found into her forearm. It lit up as soon as it was in place.

"Ohhhh," she said, still in his head, and propped herself up with her newly energised arm. "But what happened to you?"

"What? Oh, Penguin's ships have lasers. It's nothing. That was the only bionic I could find. I looked all through the chest. I don't know where your other modules could be."

Her happiness dimmed a little bit. "What's that you've got?" she asked, pointing at the trailer.

Alligator pulled it up to her. It was an old artillery cannon.

"That's for if Penguin comes down here," he explained.

With her super-strong arm, Jamie flipped it over. U.S ARMY 105 M.M. was printed in raised letters on the bottom of its chassis.

"I've got an idea," she said, and then explained it to him.

Alligator didn't like it. "But I just thought I could use it to scare them – "

"Do you want to be trapped here forever?"

"It's okay under here."

"If you make them scared of you, then you'll be able to go swimming again. And we'll be able to go outside together. I haven't been out from under this bed in ages." Alligator got all her sadness along with those words.

"Okay," he said, but his words were mostly made of guilt.

Lights-out came. Again, Penguin read:

General Stanley believed that the most important shield against evil is not the gun, but the *citizen* who wields it. And that is what we graduate – not mere soldiers, but *citizens*.

We take our duties as keepers of the Stanley name-sake very seriously. Our program is not trivial. It will challenge you in ways that you may not like. But it creates results. Our graduates are educated, dutiful, and self-sacrificing. Please see the Appendices for our list of distinguished alumni . . .

WEDNESDAY

As soon as there was light in the room, Alligator marched out from under the bed.

Between his shoulders was the artillery cannon, held in place by a thick rubber band that wound around his stomach. The cannon had a new accessory – Jamie's bionic module, stuck to its breech with a dust-crunchy lump of purple play-doh. The attaching work had been done quietly after lights-out the night before, by the glow of a crème brûlée torch.

His fury ignited by the notion of a lights-out violation, Penguin launched Black Squadron immediately. Intent on revenge, they attacked Alligator like a hurricane, pelting him with laser shots.

He reared up, balancing on his tail, and fired at the first ship that crossed his nose. But instead of a clumsy cannonball, mega-energy from Jamie's bionic module roared from the cannon's barrel. Jamie had called their new invention the awesome-cannon, and it was indeed awesome; the glancing hit that Alligator scored was enough to blow the fighter into its component bricks.

The attackers paused, stunned. Alligator made good use of their confusion. He whirled and jerked and fired and when he was done, all of Black Squadron was in pieces.

Now I've shown them, thought Alligator.

He heard the whine of engines. Green Squadron was launching. They rose from the hangar in perfect formation, then turned in unison to face him. He opened fire, zapping whole rows of them at a time. Exposed to the awesome-cannon's full blast, some of them exploded into shards; others melted, scattering bright green plastic drips onto the hardwood. The air was heavy with their burning smell.

Now Penguin's sentries were rushing towards him. The musketeers led, their long rifles firing. Other figures, glued to the top of little metal cars, roared around Alligator, shooting his flanks and tail. He pounced on them two and three at a time, breaking their spines, snapping them in half, squashing their vehicles. Behind them, Rocky the plush racoon bellowed and reared. Alligator fired, and cottony stuffing fountained like pillow feathers.

He heard more engines. More of Penguin's fighters were warming up for takeoff.

Alligator loosed the awesome-cannon on the hangar. Its struts splintered and scorched under the terrible firepower, then it collapsed, burying everything inside.

It was quiet for a second, then sirens started behind him. Startled, Alligator spun and fired again. Fireman Geoff and his team – even those that weren't hit directly by the blast – died instantly. The awesome-cannon's mega-energy was so radioactive that it horribly killed everyone in Geoff's unprotected squad.

Penguin shrieked. Noncombatants killed in cold blood! He pictured a trial, pictured Alligator being slowly roasted by his own evil weapon. But he'd lost the advantage; he needed to stall, to bring his penguin brain down from its outrage and let his cunning re-establish itself. This was just a single battle. There would be other opportunities to win the final war.

"Let there be peace," he said quietly.

Alligator looked skyward at his untouchable foe. Penguin was beyond the range of even the awesome-cannon.

"I swear there will be peace," Penguin said.

That seemed satisfactory to Alligator. He turned around and trundled back under the bed.

Exhausted by the battle, Alligator slept until just before lights-out, when Jamie woke him.

"Hey, kiddo," she said, her words loaded with every minute she'd waited for him to wake up. "We going to take a stroll, or what?"

"Okay," he said, sleepily.

She pulled herself up onto his back, where the awesome-cannon had been. The rubber band was looped over his neck and her legs so that she'd stay put.

"Ready?" asked Alligator.

She patted his back, and he took her outside.

"Gosh, it's not like I remember it," she said. "Is that Penguin? He doesn't look so big."

Alligator didn't answer. He crept out into the hallway, moving quietly because it was almost lights-out, and that wasn't a good time for noise.

"What's that?" Jamie asked.

He looked around.

"Up there, silly." He looked up and saw the ramp that started high above the hall and spiralled down into the forbidden parts of the house.

"Hang on," Alligator said, then he jumped and landed on the post.

"I didn't know that alligators could jump."

"We can." There was a groove going down the ramp, just wide enough to fit him. "Ready?" he said, as he settled into it.

"Wait – " she said, but he let go anyway. Down they went. In her mind, Jamie whooped and screamed like she was on a roller coaster, but in real life, she was quiet.

The ramp ended. They soared and tumbled and landed with a clatter, among growls and shining eyes and wetness.

The pinschers, Alligator remembered. They'd landed in the middle of the pack, a very dangerous place. The pinschers were

chewers, and very fond of plastic.

Alligator yanked himself free and ran for the stairs. He took the first three in a single leap, and didn't stop until he remembered that the pinschers were forbidden to go beyond the first stair.

He stopped on the landing and turned to see three identical narrow brown heads whining at him from the basement. Their complaints were quiet, though; they too knew the penalty for noise violations. Buoyed by their powerlessness, Alligator turned and began hopping upstairs.

"That was fun!" Jamie said. "But my hair's all gooey with dog spit."

"Look at that!" Jamie said when they reached the top of the stairs.

"What?" Alligator asked.

"The uniform!"

Alligator looked up. Hanging from the closet door was a boy's jacket, heavy and navy-blue and studded with silver buttons. It was wrapped in dry-cleaners' plastic.

"It's so handsome!" Jamie said. "Can we take off the plastic?"

"No," Alligator said.

"Why not?"

"Because it's not a toy."

"But I want to see what kind of fabric - "

"It's not a toy."

8

"I will not lie, cheat, or steal, nor will I suffer others who do so." Some say that the crimes prohibited by the Code are too specific, and do not cover the full range of prohibited behaviour. What one must understand is that the Code represents not a definition but a spirit . . .

Penguin flipped to another section, his favourite:

The naive preach of a world in which the concepts of good and evil have been rendered obsolete.

Then, further down the page:

Our enemy is not our equal, and as such, he is not subject to our honour code. At root our code is made up of romantic impulses; impulses which are inappropriate on the battlefield. Our pursuit of victory must not be undermined by them.

"You understand how important this is?" Penguin asked.

"Aye-sir!" his new squadron radioed. They were a ramshackle, multicoloured outfit, assembled from whatever intact parts could be found, then shamefully hidden between the folds of clothes in the half-full suitcase that sat beneath Penguin's shelf. When Penguin heard the spirit that boomed through their radios, he relaxed. He didn't have to worry about Rainbow Squadron. The last battle of the final war was in good hands.

THURSDAY

They were under the bed again.

"I was thinking," said Jamie, "that maybe you'd make more friends if you could talk."

"Oh, I don't know," said Alligator.

"Don't you want to talk? My bionic module has a backup mind-reading system," she said. "If we could make it work for you, then you could talk to people just like I do."

"Well, I don't have any place you can put it, so - "

"We can pop one of your legs off."

"I don't know - "

"And then we can shake it up into your head."

DUST SWIRLED AS HE ROTATED TO FACE HER, TURNING HIS EYES INTO GLOWING RED CLOUDS.
HE PUT THE CANNON ASIDE AND ROLLED TOWARDS HER.



"But what if it doesn't work?"

"We should try, just in case it does. I'll stay here and you can go out and try to send to me and we'll see if that works."

"I suppose," Alligator said, hoping that her mindreader detected his nervousness.

"Okay. Let's get that leg off," Jamie said.

Alligator limped out into the room. His leg wasn't right; it hadn't been possible to pop it properly back into its socket. But the bionic was inside of him. He'd wiggled himself until it rattled into his head and now he was walking very gingerly, so that it didn't shake out.

He didn't feel any different. Jamie couldn't tell him how it would work. "It just does," she'd said.

"Jamie, are you there?" he tried when he was in about the middle of the room.

No response. He considered turning back, but then it occurred to him that maybe his body was like a TV antenna that needed to be positioned right. He spun around and twisted his legs and rolled on his back, but still the bionic remained silent.

If only I could wag my tail, he thought, but of course he couldn't. SAM the Sea-Action Man had seen to that. He decided to try, and if he couldn't, then he'd go tell Jamie it wasn't going to work. He strained mightily and managed to turn his head just a bit. The harpoon tip made a deep scraping noise.

He stopped and listened again. Yes, now he could hear something – something far away, screaming . . .

It's engines, he realised. *Rocket engines –*

Above him, on the bed, fighters were lifting off.

Penguin had watched Alligator's contortions carefully. He'd been puzzled, not sure if his enemy was playing or dancing or just plain crazy. Whatever Alligator was doing, Penguin had finally decided, it was not important, because in his twists and turns, he'd worked himself into the middle of the room. He was as far from cover as was possible, and he was helpless on his back to boot.

Penguin had assumed personal command of the final battle. The order was his to give. "Attack!" he bellowed.

Rainbow Squadron roared forward. As soon as they cleared the bed, their lasers started firing, carving red lines across Alligator's vulnerable belly.

The pain was so bad that it paralysed Alligator's mind. He could do nothing but thrash as ship after ship poured laser fire into him.

Finally, the firing stopped, and Alligator's head cleared enough so he could roll right-side-up. In front of him, across the room, was the toy chest. He ran for it, his toes scrabbling on the hardwood.

"Another pass!" Penguin ordered.

Rainbow Squadron looped around, hovered briefly to re-establish its formation, then dove again. Sizzling laserbolts tracked Alligator as he dashed for safety.

He was going to make it, Penguin saw. He cursed himself; he should have known to have the box locked –

"Stop him!" he roared. In all the Rainbow Squadron cockpits, gloved hands set collision courses.

Alligator leapt. He caught the edge of the chest with his forelimbs and dangled, half-in, half-out. The bionic rattled in his tail.

Rainbow Alpha soared barely over his nose, scraping a tiny plastic shaving from it. Other Rainbows, their aim poor and their speeds too great, smashed into the side of the toy chest and exploded, showering Alligator with hot debris.

They're crazy! he thought, and then Rainbow-Delta smacked into his bad leg. It snapped off and was consumed by Delta's explosion.

With a final huff of terrified strength, Alligator heaved himself over the lip of the box. He fell inside, landing with a crunch.

Above, Penguin seethed. He'd sacrificed his fighters, but Alligator was still alive!

He forced himself to calm down. He was Porcelain Penguin; he was calm, all-seeing, all-knowing. And he still had Robot.

He would find out what Alligator had under the bed.

His vision hampered by the gloom of the underbed, Robot didn't notice Jamie at first. He was bending to examine the awesome-cannon when his sensors detected her. Her readings were very faint; without her bionic module she hardly registered as a life form.

Dust swirled as he rotated to face her, turning his eyes into glowing red clouds. He put the cannon aside and rolled towards her.

"Please don't hurt me," she mind-sent to him.

He grabbed her legs with his pincers and dragged her deeper under the bed.

The heater! she thought. He was taking her to the baseboard heater! *Alligator!* she mind-shouted.

Her arms got to the heater first. They were locked in position, straight above her head. Robot's treads fishtailed on the dusty hardwood, but his push didn't slacken.

Slowly, her fingers began to soften.

When Alligator woke up, he was lying in a pile of debris.

The bionic had shook its way up into his head, probably when he plummeted down into the chest.

"Hello?" he said in his mind. Maybe in the toybox, at ultraclose range with cardboard walls to echo the signal, the bionic would work and he'd contact someone.

But he heard nothing.

Fine, he thought to himself. He'd told Jamie that it wouldn't work, but she never listened, she just told. And she'd nearly gotten him killed.

Maybe, he thought, *I should just stay in the chest.* Penguin couldn't attack him there, not with all the friendly toys there. He could use them as shelter.

He got up, balancing carefully on his three intact legs. Yes, he could do better for himself. He could start over, make friends on his terms –

Suddenly, looking around, he realised that he'd never hear anything from anyone in the toy chest, with or without a bionic module. All the toys were dead, charred or smashed or blown empty of stuffing. The war with Penguin had been total.

He thought about that for awhile. He had Jamie. That made him the winner, didn't it?

He had to get back to see her. But how? The bionic. Would it work in his leg?

He reared up and rolled to the side, and the module fell into his good leg. Instantly, his leg came alive, feeling like a heavy, tightly-wound spring, ready to catapult him wherever he needed to go.

It's good for something after all! he thought as he shot out of the chest. He didn't pause to look at Penguin or anything else; he just raced directly across the hardwood to the bed.

The underbed stank like burnt plastic. He knew what had happened even before he saw Robot's glowing red eyes swivel towards him.

Jamie was gone, and Robot had done it.

Alligator didn't break his pace. He aimed himself at Robot, then spun around on his good leg so he was leading with his tail.

Robot made an crackly electronic noise as Alligator's tail punched a pencil-sized hole through the soft plastic grate over his speaker. He tried to talk but made only fuzzy zzz-zzz-zzz noises. Then his eyes flickered and he went still.

Alligator pulled his tail out of Robot and went to find Jamie.

She was where Robot had left her, lying facedown in front of the baseboard. Her head was burned halfway through; Robot had stopped pushing her against the heater once it had melted down to her nose.

Alligator turned sideways and wriggled; after a few seconds, the bionic module slipped out of his empty leg-socket and onto the floor. He turned her right-side up and placed the bionic in her exposed head cavity. It fit nicely, like a soft-boiled egg in a cup.

He heard something in his head, but it wasn't Jamie. It was more like a dial tone.

Horrified, he knocked the bionic from her head with a foreclaw.

Now it was just him and Penguin. Helpless, invulnerable Penguin. He picked up the bionic, popped it back inside of himself, and wiggled until it landed in his good leg.

It burned.

The room was silent as Alligator went out to meet Penguin for the last time.

"We will not negotiate," Penguin said.

Alligator ignored him.

"You do nothing but add to our glory. We will win this final war. It is inevitable."

Alligator stopped in the middle of the room and turned to face Penguin.

"If you have come to beg for mercy - "

With one giant push of his bionic-powered leg, Alligator went up like a rocket. He soared above the height of the toy box, above the dresser-drawers, above even where Penguin's fighters could fly, and clattered off the bottom of Penguin's shelf.

"What are you doing?" Penguin yelled.

Alligator recovered from his landing and gathered himself again.

"I am not a toy!" Penguin screamed.

Again, Alligator leapt, this time grazing Penguin. He teetered on the edge.

"You can't hurt me, I'm not in the war!"

Alligator jumped once more and made square contact. Penguin toppled, went roll-roll-roll. His beak almost stopped him near the edge of the shelf. Almost.

"I'm not a toy! I'm not a toy! I'm not a toy!"

Smash.

And Alligator was truly alone.

The remains of the toys – and Penguin too – were taken away and put on the curb outside.

There was no point in keeping broken toys.

SATURDAY

Alligator had not had a pleasant weekend. He'd started out suffocating in a pile of tightly packed sweaters; now, he was underneath a scratchy blanket that smelled of oily soap.

The bionic was still in his head. There was no danger of it rattling out of his body now; a piece of masking tape had been placed over the empty leg-socket.

It had been vibrating strangely since he'd gotten under the covers. When he concentrated on it, he heard scared, quaking noises, first sounding far away, and then closer. Maybe Jamie had been right – maybe the mind-reader would work for him after all.

"Hello?" he said, in his mind.

The response hit Alligator like a machine gun, *don'tcrystupid don'tcrystupid don'tcrystupid*. Water dampened his nose, salty warm water which arrived in smears and drops, and suddenly everything under the covers was trembling.

At first, Alligator was terrified. *Couldn't I have peace and quiet?* he wondered to himself. *Haven't I earned it?* But then he stopped and paid attention to his bionic.

There was no hatred under the covers, it said, no cruelty. Just fear.

Alligator found he knew just what to say: "You're not alone. You can be brave."

And as the crying slowly faded to hiccups, he was amazed at how much he believed his own words.

John Aegard's work has previously appeared in *On Spec* and *Strange Horizons*. Later this year his story 'Feng Burger' will appear in *Best of the Rest 3*. John lives in Portland, Oregon and is a member of the WORDOS writers' group.

FRIDAY

All was quiet.

worl~~s~~ beyond number

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JAPAN'S DARK LANTERNS

AN EXAMINATION OF THE SHADOWS BENEATH THE RISING SUN BY JOHN PAUL CATTON

The concept of 'horror' and what scares us naturally depends on which culture we come from. The archetypes of Gothic romance, the Judeo-Christian concepts of absolute Good and Evil are so familiar to us Westerners, we tend to forget that other cultures have a different outlook on the unknown.

Which is why Japanese modern horror films may be attracting so much attention at the moment. Having cleaned up at home, these live-action thrillers from the genre called 'psycho-horror' have found an eager audience in America, where interest in 'anime' had paved the way for further Japanese imports. The spearhead of this invasion was the movie *Ring* and its sequel *Ring 2*, adapted by director Hideo Nakata from the best-selling novels by Koji Suzuki.

Hollywood hasn't wasted any time in getting involved. It has a tradition of remaking successful films from other countries – from *Die Hard* to *Shogun* – for American audiences, and so a new version of *Ring* is under production by DreamWorks with Gore Verbinski (*The Mexican Mouse Hunt*) directing. Also in the works is Hideo Nakata's suspense-thriller *Chaos*, with Robert DeNiro producing for Universal Pictures, and most likely starring Benicio Del Toro (playing yet another kidnapper who gets in deep trouble – someone have a word with his casting agent, please).

Perhaps most eagerly awaited is director Kiyoshi Kurosawa's techno-shocker *Kairo* (AKA *Pulse*), which won the International Film Critics Award at Cannes 2001 – the third year in succession that a Japanese film of any kind has won that honour. It's reported that Wes Craven himself is helming the Hollywood version, which stars Kirsten Dunst.

In TTA24, I tried to explain what makes modern Japanese horror so different and why 'psycho-horror' has been so popular here, but so much of it, like so much of everything in Japan, is 'kuromaku' – a term taken from the world of Kabuki drama, and which means 'the black curtain'. In a Japanese film we see the characters, we read the subtitles,

we follow what happens to them; but there are depths which are hidden from us. There are dramatic and cultural cues which are behind the main action, like black-clad Kabuki assistants in the unlit areas of the stage, cues of cultural and racial memories which are just as important to the drama as the foreground action.

New technology – fear of it and of its exploitation – is undoubtedly a key element in psycho-horror, as can be seen in the highly technophobic *Kairo*. A more complex factor, however, concerns the popular image of that modern folk devil, the serial killer.

Take Hannibal Lecter, Hollywood has turned him into the James Bond of mass murderers, suave and unstoppable, a member of movieland's cultural elite. Looking back further, bogeymen such as Freddy, Jason and Michael may have had their origins as ordinary folks, but their cartoonish deeds in sequel after sequel have turned them into figures of caricature, not terror.

But in films such as Kiyoshi Kurosawa's *Maboroshi no Jikan* (*Death by Ultraviolet*) and Joji Iida's *Another Heaven*, the central villain in each case is far closer to home. In this sub-genre of psycho-horror, the villains are ordinary middle-class suburban residents, driven to acts of murder while 'possessed' by forces from not of this world. In Takashi Miike's already-notorious *Audition*, a bachelor holding auditions for a prospective wife gets more than he bargained for when the no-frills secretary he picks unleashes sexual mayhem.

This is right-wing horror in the extreme, as we watch Japan's cops and scientists struggle gamely to identify what is turning polyester-suited wage-slaves into remorseless, calculating killers. These agents of the new chaos look exactly like everyone else, plain but well-groomed, moving unnoticed through sterile office buildings, floodlit parking lots and antiseptic apartment buildings, compelled to perform grotesque acts of murder by forces that cannot be reasoned with.

These fictional explorations of what Carl



Jung called the Shadow relate to a real-life problem in Japanese society. In the late 90s, a new buzzword was coined by the Japanese media: 'kireru' (snap violence). This stands for the motiveless, random, unpremeditated acts of violence which currently plague Japan. There's nothing like the mass shootings of gun-culture USA, but in the last few years there have been well-publicised cases of Japanese males going berserk in public and lashing out at passers-by with knives, hammers or baseball bats. In the first half of 2002, the media have covered arguments over trivial slights that escalated into fatal beatings inflicted with umbrellas, crash helmets, and in one bizarre case, a child's car safety seat. The reasons given for the arguments that flare out of control range from rows over parking spaces, being jostled on the train, even failing to address an acquaintance by the correct honorific term. Whatever forces may be at work, there's no doubt that some Japanese are losing it big time.

Funnily enough, the psycho-horror genre is taking a lull here at the moment, with the leading directors having moved on to other things – perhaps because reality is scary enough as it is. The average Tokyo-dweller is finding modern life means coping with the threat of unemployment or bankruptcy, marital woes and rebellious youth, while living in a city which may one day be the murder capital of South East Asia. Now that's what I call horror!

Josh Machen told himself that jealousy was as much part of being in love as all the other demonstrable gestures, like twiddling your partner's hair across a dinner table and giving her knowing glances on crowded tube trains, that it simply proved how much you cared. Kate teased him about it. "By your reckoning, Othello was a regular guy acting pretty much within his rights," she suggested. Being jealous meant that someone was always on your mind, which was desirable, so the subject remained a joke between them.

It stopped being a joke after Josh followed her to a hen night and accused a male stripper of touching her thighs. As they argued about the exact height of the young man's teasing hands, Kate's amused smile faded. After that, he questioned her movements, checked her mobile phone for unrecognisable addresses and her e-mail box for mysterious correspondents. Usually he apologised afterwards, but that didn't make it better.

"It's living in London," Josh told her over a conciliatory dinner in his favourite Camden restaurant, the Cypriot joint he always used for making announcements. "Ten million people all on the make, lots of men looking at you with an eye on the main chance, it's no wonder relationships don't last in this city."

"Are you telling me this is why we never eat anywhere fashionable?" she asked, only half teasing. The one-eyed owner slipped readily between his patrons, making them uneasy.

"How different could our lives be if we were living somewhere else? Somewhere warm and dry, where the streets aren't covered in trash and every other shop isn't a fried chicken outlet? London's dying, it doesn't have residents now, it has inmates. There's more crime here than in New York, it's got a third world transport system, there are just too many people. I look at old photographs of half-deserted streets and think that's the city I want back."

"You can't stop the world, Josh."

"No, but you can find a place in it that suits you better."

"You really think it would make a difference to us living somewhere else?"

"Yes, I do."

"Do you have a place in mind?"

"If I came up with an idea, would you at least consider it?"

"I suppose so," she agreed vaguely. "This isn't anything to do with getting me all to yourself on some island, is it?"

"Of course not. I think it would be good for both of us to see a little more of the planet. I never took a gap year like you."

She wondered whether it was the city he longed to run away from, or the fact that he could not trust himself to trust her here.

For a long time, Kate refused to get married. She had seen how marriage had crushed the life from her parents, and had no desire to follow in their carpet-slipped footsteps. Why else was it called wedlock? She finally relented because she thought it would answer the question of trust that hung between them once and for all. Josh centred his world too much around hers. He got under her feet. With the trust marriage brought, he might become free to find himself.

After a grimly nondescript civil ceremony which her parents boycotted, she moved in with him, shoving an extra bed into his tiny flat near Victoria Park. The marriage contract held an implicit promise, that Josh would learn to behave less like a jealous schoolboy. She wondered what had happened in his past to make him so scared of losing her.

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She worried at first that life together in Victoria Park would become claustrophobic, but as they worked flexi-time in different parts of the city (she was a research scientist at the King's Cross College of Tropical Medicine, he worked as an in-house designer for an ailing record company in Kensington) they didn't see as much of each other as she had imagined. They were both Londoners, both had too many old friends, too many birthdays to celebrate, too many arrangements to squeeze into their free hours. And like centuries of Londoners before them, they respected privacy.

Then Josh lost his job.

After three months spent sitting around the flat waiting for companies to call back, he was becoming morose and frustrated. Cutbacks, retrenchment, the music business faring poorly, the same excuses were trotted out time and again. They were looking for cheap labour, and that meant buying young staff. Josh would be thirty one this year, and as a designer working to attract teenage sales, they feared he was past his sell-by date. He maintained his old contacts and managed to keep some occasional freelance work, but it wasn't enough to pay the bills. Kate often went out in the evenings with colleagues from her department. Josh had nothing in common with these intense biologists, and stayed at home, but always waited up so that he could discreetly question her when she returned.

It didn't take either of them long to see how the strain of their new circumstances was damaging their relationship. Something, they knew, would have to be done. They loved each other very much, but too many things were getting in the way.

It was Kate who heard about the offer from a Malaysian lady who had recently joined the department.

"You're talking about a pretty severe change of lifestyle," said Josh, after she explained what the move would entail.

"You said you wanted to get out of London," she reminded him, anxiously unfolding the map across the pub table.

"London, yes, but giving up the whole Western hemisphere seems a bit extreme."

"It would be perfect for my thesis. Look, Malaysia's divided into two separate chunks, the West peninsula, and the North-West section of Borneo. Taman's supposed to be somewhere off the West coast of the peninsular." Her finger traced the line of the sea. "Here it is. You have to look carefully."

"I thought she said it was tiny."

"You're looking at Langkawi. Taman island a little further to the North. See?"

"It's a speck. What's the scale of this thing?"

"Flights go to Kuala Lumpur, then it's an internal hop to Langkawi and finally there's a short ferry ride."

"Dear God, that's a long way off the map."

They examined the emerald droplet together. The island was so small that there were no towns marked on it. Kate checked the map again, looking for something positive to remark upon.

"It looks nearer to the coast of Malaysia than Langkawi Island. It's just not been opened to tourism as much. The ferry only goes twice a week at the moment, but they'll expand the service if more visitors come." She pressed her hand across his. "Think about it. One of the most futuristic cities on the planet will be just a few hundred miles away. From that point of view, it's no more remote than, say, the Isle Of Man."

He ran his hand down through his hair, pressing a frown into place. "Exactly," he said gloomily.

After two meetings with the proprietors of the new hotel on Taman, Josh remained unconvinced that they should take the posting. They would be required to act as caretakers for a minimum period of four months, while the builders were finishing the rooms in the hotel's main building. The owners were a pair of Swiss bankers, and wanted someone to keep an eye on the place until they were ready to open for business in the first summer season. The money they were willing to pay for a European couple to take the job was substantial. A suite had already been furnished in the hotel's residential section, and the bankers were prepared to provide them with anything they wanted. Kate would be able to realise a cherished dream of writing up her toxicology research, something she could never find time to do in London. Josh would be able to reconsider his options, and maybe get around to the photographic career he had always wanted to pursue. But as their deadline for making a decision approached, he still refused to commit.

Then Kate ran into an old boyfriend who announced that he was single again and wished he had never broken up with her. He offered to take her to the Gordon Ramsey restaurant at Claridges for dinner on Saturday night, and try to make amends for what had once passed between them. While she was deciding whether to go or not, Josh announced that they were leaving for Malaysia.

They signed the papers, locked up the flat and transferred through Kuala Lumpur with a single large suitcase between them. Backpackers, package tourists and businessmen crowded the shuttle to Langkawi, but only a handful of locals continued on with them to the port. It was late October, a month before the start of the island's rainy season, and the first guests on Taman were to be expected at the end of March. The sleek white ferry was more modern than anything Josh had traveled on in Britain. They cut through a smooth green sea that filled with a delicate aquamarine light where the sun hit it, and felt at once that they had made the right decision to leave behind the grey dome of London sky. All around them, improbably steep plugs of jungle rose from the glittering jade water.

At Taman's jetty they were met by the works foreman, a smiling freckled Australian named Aaron Tunn, who pumped their hands hard and insisted on carrying their suitcase, hefting it onto his shoulder as though it weighed nothing. The hotel proved to be a drive away in a juddery jeep that threatened to tip over as it climbed the slippery red tyre ditches in the unlaid roads.

"This area around you is ancient rainforest," Aaron explained, pointing to the white-legged eagles that dipped into rocky outcrops behind the greenery. A streak of orange as wide as the world was settling over the jungle, pointing to the close of day.

"How old do you think it is?" asked Kate, enchanted.

"About three hundred million years, although much of it has been cut down recently. The government hasn't got a very good environmental record, but this time they're trying to get the balance right. We're dry-walling with reclaimed stone, and barely touching the forest canopy except to bury pipes. The cut paths will have completely grown over by the end of the rainy season. You can expect a downpour every day soon, but plenty of hot sun, too."

Josh clung to the side of the jeep and focussed his eyes on the green shadows of the forest. Dusty lianas looped between the trees like the arcs of a suspension bridge. Parasitic plants grew with the same thickness and strength as the trees they clung to. Something was jumping between slender bushy branches, shaking whole trunks and violently rustling treetops.

"What about poisonous insects?" he shouted to Aaron. "Is there anything we have to look out for?"

"There are one or two bugs they don't tell the tourists about," Aaron called over his shoulder, "and a mean breed of jellyfish that turns up in lagoons when it rains hard, but generally speaking, the fauna's safer here than it is back home in Perth. We've got about sixty men working on the site, a mix of locals and experts from Far East territories. They won't talk to you much, they just get on with their work and go home when the bell rings. Me and three of the lads are on site overnight, but we go to the mainland at weekends. That's the only time you'll be alone here." Aaron laughed. "You'll probably be glad of the peace and quiet by then."

For a brief moment Josh wondered if he was entering a hell of his own making. Sixty sweat-stained men slyly watching the fragrant white woman who walked past them to her bedroom, smirking at the skinny London lad who couldn't keep her satisfied.

You've been watching too many old movies, he told himself.

The track led down toward the sun, and Josh realised they had reached the far Northern tip of the island. The hotel was so well concealed in the undergrowth that he could not see it at first. As they drew nearer, angled stone walls could be glimpsed between the trees. It looked like an Incan city in miniature, a central block built low to the ground in natural materials that blended harmoniously with the dense olive landscape surrounding it. Set away from the main body of the building, a series of wooden-roofed villas could be discerned beneath the feathered leaves of the jungle's primary growth.

"It's a beaut, isn't it?" said Aaron, with the pride of a man who knew he had achieved something special. He stopped the jeep and jumped out, pulling back the seats. "We had you marked down for a suite in the main building, but it got flooded, so we built you a villa. We only finished it this morning, so you may find some of the wood seals a bit sticky, but apart from that it's ready to live in. There'll be a dozen of them when we open."

It was clear that the work whistle had just blown, because men were returning from the hotel's staff room in white short-sleeved shirts and jeans, carrying holdalls. They nodded politely at Aaron as they passed, but barely seemed to notice the new arrivals.

"They won't bother you," Aaron explained. "They're industrious and religious, only interested in getting paid and getting home. They don't speak much English, only Malay, but they're good men and won't get in your way. You'll enjoy it here. All you have to do is keep the site safe."

"Safe from what?" asked Josh, his eyes searching the undergrowth for leaping shapes. "Are there any dangerous locals hanging about?"

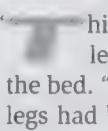
"Oh, nothing like that," Aaron replied airily, "it's just a condition of the building's insurance contract. But there are small problems. There's been some stealing. Tools, clothes, stuff left lying around."

"You think it's your workmen?"

"No, they value their jobs too highly to touch anything."

"Then who do you suspect?"

"We all know who the thieves are." Aaron set the case down on the step of their villa. "We'll talk more when you've unpacked and had a chance to freshen up."

"his will be so good for us," said Kate, folding her legs beneath the silk kimono that had been left on the bed. "Look at this place, it's incredible." The villa's teak legs had been punched into the angled, loamy floor of the

forest. The suite was basically one large polished hardwood room, divided by alcoves that extended into a pair of private bathrooms. White linen drapes hung in swathes across the shuttered windows. There was no glass in the villa; the seasonal winds were likely to draw them out.

"I thought it would be quiet, but listen to all that noise outside." Josh looked uneasily at the swaying vegetation beyond the veranda. A long yellow stick suddenly sprouted legs and moved, running along the railing to jump into the bushes. The wildness of the forest would take some getting used to. Strange birds squealed like electric saws in the tops of the trees, while crickets and toads provided a low rolling trill that had begun the moment shadows fell on the leaves. Something hooted angrily near the shore, its upturned call answered by a mate or an enemy. The canopy of the forest was so close around them that it touched the roof of the villa.

"I thought it would be quieter," repeated Josh, as he tipped the blinds shut.

Aaron's helpers had set up a meal in the partially finished dining room. They sat on fat silk cushions sorting through dishes of chicken, banana-leaf wrapped rice and a splayed fried fish with hundred of small bones.

"Two monsoons a year, nine major airstreams, a rainfall of a hundred inches, eighty five percent humidity, it's a fantastic ecosystem for breeding unique plant species," said Aaron, crunching the fish bones in strong white teeth. "Birds, too. We've got hornbills, parrots, swifts, eagles. I can watch 'em for hours. The island used to deal palm-oil with the mainland, but the government protected the trees. The locals weren't too happy until organic tourism came along."

"What about animals?" asked Kate, nipping a chunk of tender chicken from its green bamboo splinter.

"Mainland's got the lot, elephants, tigers, the Eastern half even has a few rhinos left. We've got pelandok, that's kind of a small deer, dusky leaf monkeys, some small crocs, monitor lizards, and you have to keep an eye out for snakes, mostly cobras. Good news is that the mozzies are malaria-free, but you'll still get bitten to buggery around the swamps. You get the best of both worlds here. Taman has its own natural selection patterns and its own microclimate. The animals and plants grow up differently, behave differently. You won't see stuff like this anywhere else. Zoological teams from all over the world come here. Kate tells me you're into photography, Josh. You want to take pictures, this is the place to do it."

"I used to be good at it." Josh eyed the carcass of the bony fried fish with suspicion. "I don't know whether I've brought the right equipment."

"No problem, mate. The ferry will bring in anything you order from the internet."

It crossed Josh's mind that Kate might find this plain-speaking blond Southerner attractive. "Doesn't your wife miss you out here?" he asked casually as Kate shot him a look.

"I'm not a married man, Josh, not in that sense." He popped open beers and slid them across the table. "I'm afraid I had to put the wine stock on hold because we haven't been able to drain the cellar yet. No, to answer your question, Josh, I've got a partner back on the mainland, but she runs a gardening centre and can't get away often." Kate's follow-up look to Josh warned him. *Satisfied?*

"You were going to tell us about your thief," reminded Josh, anxious to move away from his clumsy display of insecurity.

"Thieves, actually. We've got a troupe of Macaques on the island, big green-haired bastards with muzzles like baboons, you can't miss 'em. That howling noise? They head for the beach around sunset. They dig up crabs and eat 'em. The

Malays train them to pick coconuts. They'll take the washing from the lines, and won't give it back until you feed 'em. They're smart, but they're mean-spirited fuckers. They'll try to get you to join in with their games, but it's best not to interfere. You really don't want to get involved, believe me. So we let 'em steal a little, just not too much."

The next morning, Josh saw the Macaques, ten or twelve of them looping through the trees on long, muscular arms. As casually as waltzing around a maypole, their leader swung on his liana and dropped to the ground near the villa. Leaning on his forepaws, he raised a doglike whiskery head and sniffed the air through broad flat nostrils. After a few minutes, he scooted toward the verandah. The others held back, as if waiting for their leader to pass judgement. Josh realised that he was much larger than the rest, almost as big as a man. He had to weigh well over twenty kilos. His shaggy coat was, as Aaron had pointed out, a curious shade of brownish-green, his head framed by a centre-parted lion's mane of straight, swept-back hair. Implacable silk-brown eyes stared at Josh. No, not at him – past him. He turned and followed the Macaque's gaze. Kate was standing in the doorway of the bedroom, pulling a white T-shirt above her breasts, over her head.

"Don't move," Josh warned her.

"What is it?" She snapped off the shirt.

"One of the Macaques."

"Where? Oh. My God, he's enormous. Much bigger than I imagined."

"Stay where you are."

"It's all right, he's more scared of you than you are of him." Kate smiled and turned. "Would you put some sun-block on my back?"

"Don't let him see you like that."

"Like what?"

"Without your top on."

"He's an animal, Josh."

"That's not the point."

"He doesn't look at me in the same way."

"How do you know?" Josh took a step forward. The Macaque released a startling wide-mouthed howl and bounded off, followed by the rest of the troupe.

"All right, you showed him who the man was," said Kate. "Come on, alpha male, put some cream on me, then let's check out the beach."

It was the perfect place to build a hotel; a crescent of cadmium yellow beach surrounded by heavy underbrush, the sand striped with stream outlets from the hills behind. Low rolling waves indicated the shallow slope of the bay, ideal for safe swimming. White birds fell from the sky, streamlining as they hit the water, to emerge with wagging fish in their beaks. Josh held Kate's hand as they walked. In the distance he could hear Aaron's men knocking hammers on posts. They had started at six that morning, and would continue until darkness.

Aaron took them on a tour of the property boundaries. Most of the hotel was finished. Only the rest of the outlying villas remained to be built. Gangs of Malays were digging out the foundations, but water filled the ditches as quickly as the earth was shovelled out. "It'll be worse when the rains come," warned Aaron cheerfully. "Look, there's Sinno." He pointed to the burly leader Macaque they had seen near the verandah earlier. He was seated in a clearing near the water's edge, cracking a large crab out of its shell by carefully prising apart its exoskeleton. The creature's disembodied legs were still waving as he levered them into his pouting mouth. The other

members of the troupe foraged for smaller pickings on the banks of a stream.

"How did he get his name?" asked Kate as they passed.

"From his genus, Celebes 'Cynomacaca'. He's a moor Macaque, a crab-eater, although they'll eat anything in a push. He's the most intelligent one I've ever seen, but fuckin' bad tempered. I've a book on them if you're interested."

"Yes, I'd like to see that," said Kate. "Josh, you could take pictures of them."

"Just don't get too close," Aaron warned. "He's capable of pulling your arms out of their sockets, although his shout is mostly for show."

"Listen to this." Kate flattened out the page and marked a passage. "They're arboreal, diurnal, and love the company of others. They're fast swimmers, climbers and runners. Some were used in studies that led to the development of the polio vaccine. Macaques provide the models for the Buddhist saying, 'See No Evil, Hear No Evil, Speak No Evil'. Some people believe that they are human insofar as they embody the worst traits of man."

"He's sitting outside right now," said Josh, who was shaving in the bathroom.

"Who is?"

"Sinno. The leader. Sitting in the branch of a tree. I can see him from the window."

"He's probably getting used to having new neighbours."

"He's sniffing the air like he did this morning."

"I bet he can smell my perfume. After all, no one else here wears any."

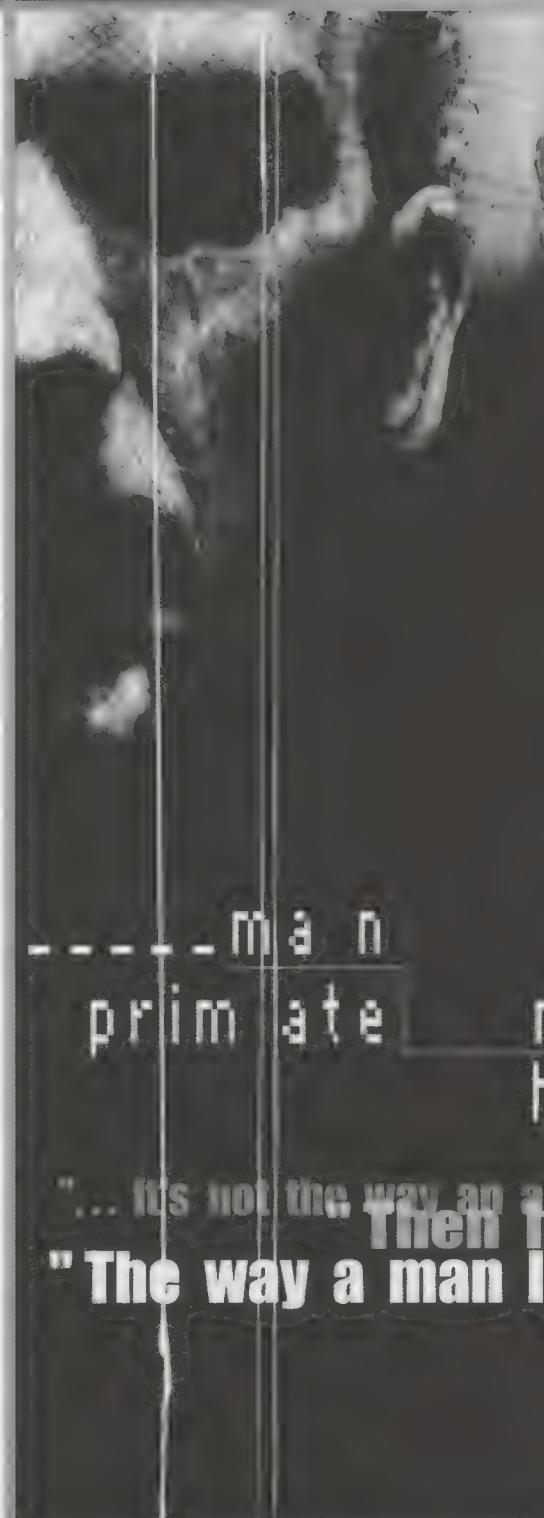
Josh shaved bristles and foam from beneath his nose, but he could see the Macaque in his mirror. The damned thing was sitting on its haunches calmly watching his wife. He studied the monkey's face too intently; the razor slipped and the blade nicked him just below the nose.

After supper that evening Josh kept watch from the verandah, but the vast, slim trees were still and silent. The forest's nocturnal residents crept silently through the undergrowth while, somewhere far above them, Taman's troupe of monkeys dreamed away the night.

The next three weeks passed easily. As their lives decelerated into an elegance of relaxed motion, boredom became inconceivable. To hurry was to sweat and grow tired. During the mornings, Josh busied himself more than was strictly necessary with administrative chores around the hotel, where the floor tiles were being polished and relays of electric wiring were discreetly added. Kate helped out in the main building, but spent most of the day working at her computer, mapping out a thesis on primate toxicology that remained incomprehensible and private to everyone but her. Late afternoons were passed in makeshift hammocks as the site lost its human sounds and all activity ceased. Shadows deepened, eye-searing yellows faded to cool greens, and small animals could be heard snuffling on the forest floor. Kate took languid baths while Josh lay face down on his bed reading.

When the tide turned, the Macaques would return from the beach where they had been digging out crabs, led by Sinno, who would lop past the villa, pausing to check the verandah. Josh knew that he took small items of Kate's from the deck, hairbrushes, hand-mirrors, combs, but never saw him do it. One day, the monkey left a neat pile of bulbous green fruit on Kate's sunchair. The fleshy split pericarps were crimson and yellow, and oozed sweet-smelling juice onto the teak deck until Josh cleared it away.

"He hangs around here like a lovesick suitor," Josh complained as he walked through the compound to the dining room. "And you're doing nothing to discourage





him. You hardly ever wear clothes in the villa. The way he looks at you, it's not the way an animal looks at a person."

"Then how is it?"

"The way a man looks at a woman."

Kate laughed off the idea. "It's too hot in the afternoon. What do you want me to do, dress as if I was in London? I'm just someone new to him, and I smell different. Besides, it helps me that he comes so close. So much of my writing is purely theoretical, he reminds me that the subjects are flesh and blood. But they don't think like humans. For years scientists tried to teach primates the American Sign Language system, but they discovered their so-called 'trained' monkeys used exactly the same signs in the wild. People have this idea of the noble savage. Everyone from Swift to Huxley has suggested that we can learn sensitivity from the apes, but the species simply don't correspond at a sociological level." She touched his arm. "I thought you were going to concentrate on your photography. You haven't taken any shots in days."

"I haven't been in the mood. Besides, Aaron's kept me busy with the inventory."

"You know he's going to the mainland at the end of the week. You'd better make a list if you want him to pick up any supplies for you."

Aaron knew that with the coming of the rains their drainage problems would increase, and was hoping to return with the spare parts he needed to keep his pumps working.

The next morning, Josh rose earlier than usual, and sat on the verandah leafing through a catalogue of photographic materials as Sinno's troupe hooted and hollered through the branches on their way back from the beach. He tried to concentrate on the pages of sleek software options, but found his attention sliding to the shapes in the trees. Behind the hulking form of their leader he could see the troupe's females. They had never come this close before. Josh slowly reached for the small digital camera he had left on the table. He quietly switched it on and studied the LCD monitor. Several of the females nursed small babies against their breasts, but one turned away whenever Josh focussed his camera on her. The other females seemed to shun her. Once or twice he caught her in the display panel, but by the time the light had adjusted to a level his equipment could read, she had sensed his attention and turned aside.

When the troupe passed in the evening, he called Kate out to the verandah. She tiptoed beside him and studied the females.

"Her baby's dead," she pointed out. Looking more closely, Josh could see now that the mother was nursing a dry furry corpse. "She won't let it go because she wants to be like the other mothers, but she knows you know that it's dead, and she's ashamed to let you see."

"You really think they can play those sorts of games?" asked Josh, surprised.

"They're not games," said Kate, "it's human nature."

"I bet he's the father." Josh glared at Sinno, who had wedged himself into his usual position overlooking the villa's bedroom. "He's waiting for you to undress again."

Kate gave an angry sigh and went indoors.

By the end of the first month, both Kate and Josh looked physically different; leaner, blonder, shiny as leather, and Kate, at least, was more relaxed. Aaron offered to take them to the mainland, but they decided to wait until a desire for the noise and chaos of cities had returned to some degree.

The rains arrived in a deafening display of ferocity. Aaron's men splashed through the building hauling portable pumps, hunting down floods and leaks in the first real test of the building's durability. Sluices of rainwater appeared in dry alleys. Kate and Josh were increasingly confined to the villa, as getting to the main building involved crossing treacherous torrential slides. Between storms the sun blazed hard, filling the forest with steam. The air was laden with the smell of rotting vegetation. Kate worked, Josh read, and they got on each other's nerves.

"I've been watching the Macaques," said Kate one morning in December. "The females are getting thinner. They don't look well. Their fur – it's changing, losing its gloss. I don't know much about their social behaviour patterns, but it looks as if they don't forage, and the males provide for them. But lately the males have stopped."

Josh knew why. Sinno was taking their supplies and daily dumping piles of fruit at the villa as some kind of votive offering. The monkey clambered into place on his branch and waited for Kate, but raced off when Josh appeared. Every morning he cleared the verandah, throwing it all back into the jungle before Kate came out.

The next day Josh opened the door to find an enormous injured crab lying on its back, grasping at the air. Sinno sat motionless in the tree in the falling rain, his fur dripping over his implacable eyes. "I'm not going to play your game," Josh muttered, gingerly raising the crab by a waving leg and hurling it into the bushes. "You're going to play mine."

The following morning, he waited until the troupe had passed, then climbed out into the forest with the linen bag he had filled with scraps from the kitchen. The Macaques were omnivores, and the females were clearly being starved. They kept to a secondary route behind the males, so this was where Josh laid the trail of food. He was still shaking the last scraps of fish from the bag when he heard the troupe returning. His heart thumped in his chest as Sinno and the other males passed within feet of him. The females followed, guiltily stopping at the trail of food and shoveling the delicacies into their cheek pouches. Sinno screamed at them and slapped at their heads as they passed, then caught sight of Josh. His inexpressive face, striped in leaf-stencilled sunlight, betrayed no emotion. He continued to stare for a full ten minutes, then swung sharply up into the trees as if scampering up a set of ladders.

Josh was frightened, but excited. He had shown the monkey who was really the boss. He had undermined Sinno's command. Over the next few days, the piles of fruit left on the balcony dwindled, but Sinno soon returned to his usual place, watching Kate.

When the refrigeration units arrived on Friday morning, Aaron needed help with the stock-orders and Josh rose early to help him, leaving Kate asleep in bed. He was more concerned about missing the troupe's morning patrol.

"We need the inventory pad," said Aaron, searching under the workbenches in the new wine cellar. "You didn't take it with you last night?"

"It's my fault, you're right," Josh admitted, "I took it back to the room. I shouldn't have had that last bottle." They had been celebrating the arrival of the French wines by working their way through a crate of breakages. "I'll get it." He picked his way back across the muddy paths, passing through scorched strips of sunlight. Ahead of him a battalion of centipedes, pillarbox red and each longer than a man's hand, undulated over the dead wet leaves. He could hear water running as he approached the villa. Kate was using the outside shower, a slatted box on the verandah with a broad copper spray head. She had her back to him, and was soaping her thighs, between

her legs. White foam drifted down the channel of her back to her buttocks. She was humming as she washed, a song they had used to sing together in London, a world away. High in the tree behind her, Simmo sat in position watching her, masturbating furiously, the exposed tip of his penis a shocking scarlet.

Bellowing, Josh ran at the tree with a rock in his hand and threw it as hard as he could. The rock hit Simmo in the face. The Macaque released a howl of pain and defiance, and vanished. Kate screamed. Josh's eyes were wild. "You knew he was there!" he yelled. "You saw him! What the hell did you think you were doing, leading him on?"

"Are you insane?" Kate shouted back, frightened by his sudden outburst. "I had no idea he was there. I never even thought to look. What kind of person do you think I am? What on earth is wrong with you?"

"Remember what Aaron said, you play games with them, they'll play games with you," said Josh, fighting to regain his breath in the heat-saturated air. "He's the leader, your alpha male, the others will follow him anywhere, do whatever he tells them to."

"Whatever he tells them?" Kate shut off the shower and grabbed a towel. "My alpha male? Listen to yourself. You did this in London, and you're doing it again, when there aren't even any humans around. These are animals you're talking about, Josh, animals! You don't even know you're doing it any more, do you?"

Josh suddenly felt lost. He tried to take Kate in his arms, but she moved beyond reach. "Forgive me, Kate," he whispered, "it's the way he looks at you, I know he wants you. I know it's grotesque but you must see that you're in danger. He studies you. He leaves gifts for you. He waits for me to leave so that he can spy on you alone. I love you, darling, I don't want you to get hurt."

"When we get back I think you need to get some professional help." Kate swept back inside the villa and slammed the door in his face.

Josh knew it was beyond anything either of them could understand. They were far from their own social circle, away from the rules that controlled them. When he was a child, visiting the Regent's Park Zoo, animals were something to be seen pacing behind bars, half-demented by their incarceration. That was before ecological correctness had taken hold. Back then, the teachers had encouraged the children to think of themselves as superior. Here, he and the primates were on equal footing, simply moving in different spheres.

He returned to work, but all day long his fear and anger grew.

n Saturday morning, Aaron caught the ferry to the mainland, promising to return that night, but in the afternoon rising monsoon winds put paid to any chance of his return. A storm-sky as grey and unbroken as the concrete walls Aaron's men had built raced overhead. In the distance they heard the tumble of thunder. The air so oppressively hot that it caught in Kate's mouth and blocked her sinuses. Numb with headache, she lay on the bed in her underwear, listening to the colliding treetops, waiting for the storm to break and lower the temperature.

Josh prowled the main building with his camera, taking close-up test shots of butterflies drying their wings, as large as the pages of paperbacks. A sense of unease had settled on him in a suffocating cauldron. The thought of being away from his wife disturbed him, but he knew that she would be angry if she suspected that he was guarding her.

That was when he realised. He had not heard from the

Macaques all afternoon. He found himself at the far side of the compound. From here it was a twenty minute walk back to the villa. He went to Aaron's locker and took the keys to the jeep, the only motorised vehicle on the island.

The fat green vehicle was parked out front on the half-gravelled drive. He climbed in and tried the ignition, but the engine would not turn over. Leaning from his seat, he lowered his head over the side and followed the trail of petrol back to the external tank. He could see from here that the petrol cannister had been punctured. Kneeling beside it, he touched the indentations left by rows of wide-set teeth. The acrid contents had drained away into the earth. Could a Macaque do that, even one as large as Sinno? Could he somehow have evolved more quickly than his relatives? Josh studied the teethmarks again and felt a lurch of fear.

Aaron kept a loaded 12-gauge slide action shotgun in his locker. He had told Josh about it the first week he was here, had even shown him how to pump and fire the damned thing in case of an unspecified emergency. Josh ran toward the locker now, dragging it out by the stock and throwing it across his arm as he ran back into the forest.

The rain began just as he was within sight of the villa. He stopped for a moment to catch his breath, and heard lightning split a branch somewhere above him. The deluge fell in large hard pellets of water, hammering the leathery leaves around him, instantly churning the ground to mud. The noise was incredible. Suddenly he could no longer see the villa.

But he could see the Macaques. They were pushing their way toward the verandah in a broad semicircle, and at the centre rose the great green back of a single primate, twice as big as any of the others. He slipped on the muddy slope, his leg collapsing under him, and rolled into the undergrowth. Thick thorns jammed themselves into his arms and legs, tearing gouts of flesh as he hauled himself upright. In a fold of the rain he could see the Macaques moving in.

"Come on, you fuckers," he shouted, pumping the gun and firing it into the air, igniting a cacophony of bird screams around him. The kickback wrenches his shoulder, but he stumbled on toward the scattering monkeys, bearing down as the beast headed away toward the beach. This time he stopped and steadied the gun against a tree before he fired. There was an explosion of terrified parrots, flashes of red and blue in the downpour, a mad tumble of feathers and leaves, as he smashed his way through the thinning undergrowth toward the sea.

He wondered if he had managed to wound it, because the great monkey was moving more slowly now, so that the rest of the troupe quickly overtook their leader. The Macaque was dragging his left leg. The forest cleared to rain-pocked sand and rock as Josh entered the farthest end of the beach, where the streams formed treacherous deep-sided pools. The rain was blinding him, making it hard to keep his eyes open, but he closed the distance.

"Who's got the balls now?" he shouted through the downpour, closing in on the limping Macaque. He needed to steady himself in order to take aim, and searched for a suitable rock. Sinno was trapped. All that stood ahead of him was a broad water pit filled by the rain-flattened sea. Still the creature had its back to him, as if unwilling to admit defeat. It hobbled to the far side of the pool and squatted heavily on the wet sand. Josh turned, searching for something stable on which to rest the shotgun.

It was then that he saw the others. Alarmingly close, they had drawn into a ring about him, and were moving quickly forward. He felt the sand softening beneath his feet and realised that he was sliding forward into the sand pool as the rain-soaked bank shifted with his weight. He tried to steady him-

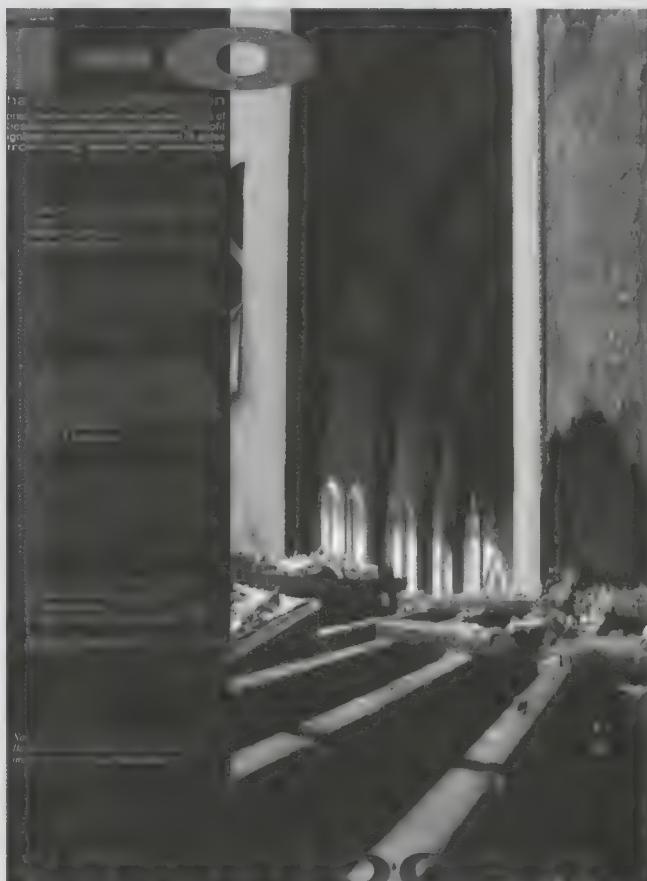
self, but the weight of the gun overbalanced him.

On the other side, the great Macaque slowly turned – or rather, he split in two, not one great primate at all but a pair of the troupe's younger males, one spread across the other's shoulders, their coarse green hair rattled together. They jumped apart and found their places in the circle, turning their calm brown eyes to him.

Josh sank swiftly into the pool. There was something odd about the water, a viscous texture he had seen before when it rained hard. As the first sting penetrated his shirt like an electric shock, he remembered Aaron's warning about swimming in heavy rain; it was when the most dangerous jellyfish surfaced. The pool was alive with them, hundreds washed in by the tide and now rising like clear plastic bags as the rain drummed the surface. Their stings trailed and wrapped about his limbs, sticking to his waist, his back, his neck, as jolts flashed through his nervous system, ten, fifty, a hundred. Paralysed by the strobing pain, the endless jabbing injections of venom, he sank into the deep green darkness, watched by the motionless members of the loyal troupe. The rain pattered and the monkeys watched, their souls ranged beyond human emotional response, their hearts only obeying the patterns of their communal life.

On the roof of the villa, Sinno scratched himself and waited until silence returned once more to the forest. Then he slid down onto the verandah and peered in through the window slats, to the bedroom where Kate lay uneasily sleeping. As quietly as Josh had ever moved, the great Macaque opened the bedroom door and slipped inside, closing it gently behind him.

Christopher Fowler is the author of twenty books including *Roofworld*, *The Bureau of Lost Souls*, *Rune*, *Sharper Knives*, *Flesh Wounds*, *Spanky*, *Personal Demons*, *Uncut*, *Psychoville* and *The Devil in Me*. Two new novels, *Mr Bryant & Mr May* and *Plastic*, are forthcoming, as is a new volume of short stories, *Night Nerves*.



Electric Darkness



Talk to Chris about Electric Darkness, films, his novels and short stories at www.ttapress.com/discus

The Ladykillers



Peculiar English

I tend to think of this magazine as a celebration of the peculiar, and there can be no bigger example of that state than English cinema. If you've ever wondered why, with our wealth of creative talent, we now languish near the bottom of the world cinema league table, here's a sobering thought. By the time the English authorities decided to tear down the doors of Newgate Gaol, London's notorious seven hundred year-old lair of highwaymen and cutthroats, America was already showing its first motion pictures to delighted audiences. It's one of those peculiar historical overlaps that seem impossible, like the idea of Oscar Wilde travelling by tube, or the fountain pen being invented after the telephone.

Our venerable traditions, so useful as literary structures for taking stories to the world, delayed us from entering such a technologically innovative field as cinema. Although centuries of English publishers appreciated that coffee-houses and bookshops were essential for the dissemination of news and literature, English producers failed to keep a grip on their studios and movie-houses. Our disrespect for cinema surfaces in the long usage of the term 'fleapits'. Without an adequate infrastructure, our once-bright hope of maintaining popular interest in English films was doomed. A crippling war shut down production, the limitations of Odeon, Granada and ABC exhibition reduced the choice of outlets, and the final body-blow was dealt when Margaret Thatcher forced English studios into 'four wall' renting. Audiences came to regard English films as a tepid sidebar to television, and a golden opportunity slunk silently away.

But weaknesses in distribution and exhibition only tell part of the story. There was a basic lack of trust in the profitability of English films and their stars. Hollywood was the perfect place for experimentation with an art that came bolted to science; capital was available, rain was rare, space

was ample, the country was unfettered by the baggage of history and talent could be bought in from anywhere. England, even more of an indoor society in those days, built a few small studios, but rarely ventured outside to film. There is a paralysing stiffness in old English films that does not begin to fade until after 1945. The 'Angry Young Man' dramas of the fifties helped, but our century-long fascination with the supernatural clinched our switch into English Peculiar.

Sensual Sadism

In his seminal study of English film, *A Mirror For England*, Raymond Durgnat referred to the 'dreamlike physicality' of Hammer, but recognised that they succeeded because they were made in a morally hypocritical country (which is why such films are harder to restage now). Their unholy mix of sadism, tragedy, Oedipal and castration complexes acted like a chemical formula that Durgnat boiled down thus:

'Physical atrocity interacting with moral irony + dandy coldness + sensuousness + Victorian nostalgias + Victorian materialism'. He suggested our newly liberated sadistic tone stemmed from a cruelty that turns everything into moral apathy. He thought a lot of English supernatural films were tosh, of course, and was annoyed by plot contrivances that allowed most of the running time of *The Gorgon* to dwell on whether or not such a beast existed, when the audience knew there would be no film without one.

The newly recognised sensual cruelty of the supernatural helped to shake English cinema free of proscenium-arch declamation. In the sixties English films were both profitable and exportable, thanks largely to our horror, SF and fantasy output. A surprising number of strange viewing pleasures come from old English films – top-hatted toffs sliding down tube station steps on tea trays in *Bulldog Jack*, Michael Redgrave trying to silence his ventriloquist dummy in *Dead Of Night*, Ian Carmichael's horrified rant about Britain making him sick in *I'm All Right, Jack*, David Warner's gorilla-obsessed *Horror Of Margot* – a surreal ghost train ride of a movie *Oh What A Lovely War*.

Dracula became a symbol of sixties English grotesque, but so did Ken Russell. His run of outlandish films climaxed with Ann-Margret being sprayed in tons of baked beans in *Tommy*. In one year alone he gave us Pythonesque gore in *The Music Lovers*, Busby Berkeley-on-acid sets in *The Boyfriend*, and the frenzied nuns of Derek Jarman's startling white-tiled convent in *The Devils*. But then, this is a man who, at his peak, directed sixteen productions in three years. It was easier to make such films then.

Birds and Bs

Elstree was always different from Hollywood. For a start, we didn't have too many sex bombs, although Diana Dors frequently gave her all, Joan Greenwood offered husky upper-class sex appeal, Margaret Leighton swaggered with a robust low-cut earthiness, Vanessa Redgrave had hippyish hauteur, Jenny Agutter brightened schoolboy nights, and pointy-brassiered Liz Fraser pouted when Tony Hancock asked for a cappuccino with no froth in *The Rebel*. The luminous Julie Christie seemed to operate from a place above everyone else, in the way that Catherine Deneuve still does in French films, but generally speaking, English women went from buttoned-down frigidity, via a brief period of adult frankness, to being treated with a mixture

of admiration and adoration, suggesting that they were the most beautiful women in the world.

Our women rarely exhibited the frontier emancipation of American heroines. Our heroes were cut from different cloth, too, tending toward the Boy-Next-Door cheeriness of John Mills, the elegant sturdiness of Richardson and Gielgud, the day-dreaming Tom Courtenay, the effete charm of Alec Guinness, the neurasthenic mannerisms of Peter Sellers. English performers had grown up handling the twice-nightlies and provincial tours, and considered their work a craft like any other. Celia Johnson, so the story goes, asked if David Lean could hurry up the shooting of her big romantic scene in *Brief Encounter* because she had a train to catch.

We excelled in absurd dark comedy and horror, and mixed elements of both in *The Whispers*, *They Came to Stay*, *The Wicker Man*, *The Quiller Memorandum*.

Certainly, they now seem preferable to the social-conscience huffings of Lindsey Anderson, whose films have dated cruelly. *If...* was shot at Anderson's old public school, and now seems like the sulky revenge of a disgruntled trustafarian. Few of these films were highly regarded by English critics, who sought to reduce the visibility and importance of local films. For decades critics perpetuated myths about 'quality' English filmmaking, dismissing 'unimportant' films (particularly supernatural tales) as being unworthy of attention.

When we look back on old films, we usually dismiss their context. Who now appreciates the furor that the subject matter of *Victim* caused in the newspapers of 1961, a full four years after the Wolfenden Report? Who can remember why *The Belles Of St Trinians* landed itself with an X certificate in South Africa? What about the anti-European disgust that the sexual revolution of the French New Wave caused on these shores? Drug culture created clued-up audiences for *Performance* just as they did for *Human Traffic*. It is already hard to comprehend the tabloid mentality that could attempt to link *Child's Play 3* with the Jamie Bulger killing. No film opens without some mitigating circumstance surrounding it.

The Film Of The Book

English films were often based on novels, which gave them a strong structure. The irony is that English novels are peppered with weak men who observe the action of their lives from a distance. The English nature seems drawn to these types of stories, which is probably why we have historically had problems relating to certain American films.



The Man In The White Suit

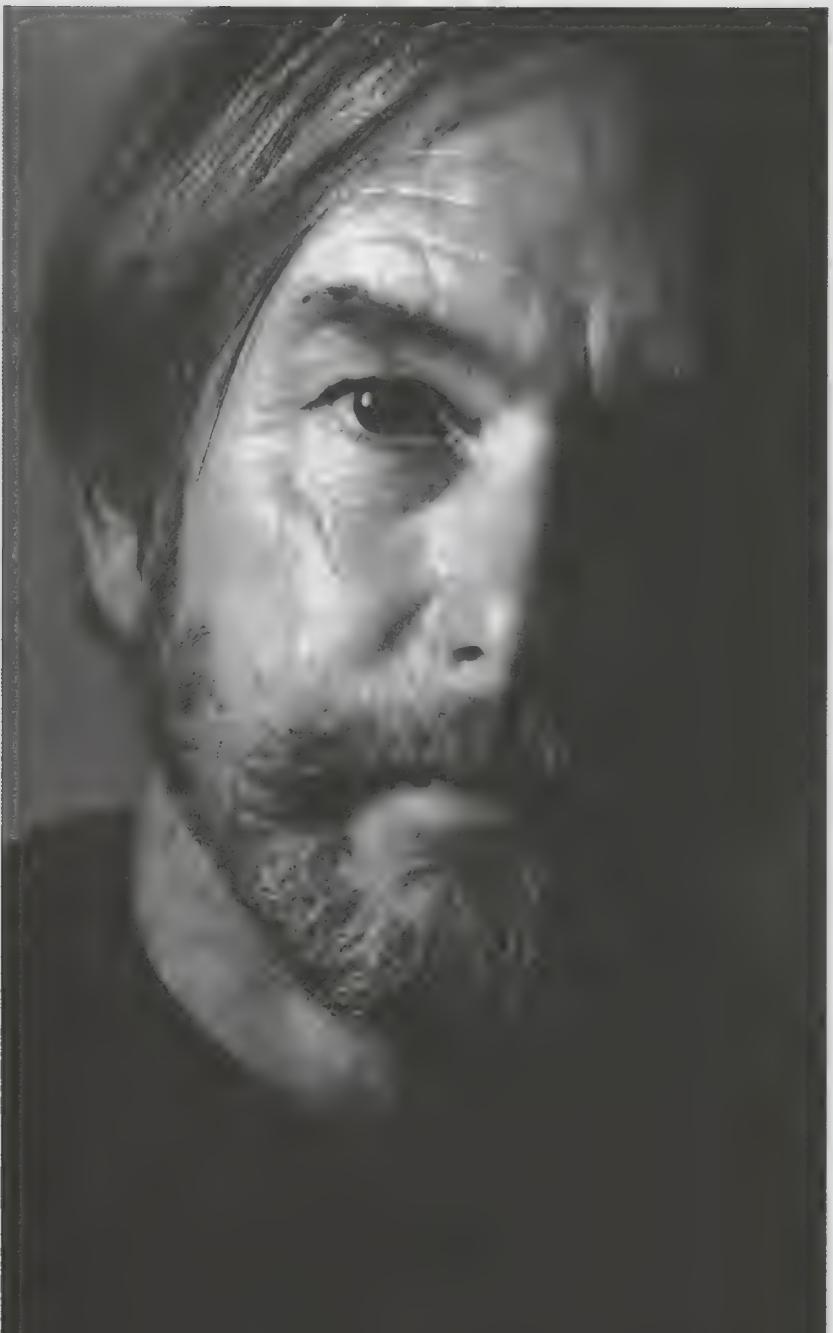
The US has always admired heroes. We admire plucky losers and anti-heroes. Consequently, old English comedies are dry and self-effacing. Michael Palin brought a marvellous sense of innocence to *The Missionary*, while Steve Coogan's *The Parole Officer* is a later film version of the failed Englishman at his irritating level. Most of our gangster films – with a few exceptions, like *Get Carter* and *The Long Good Friday* – run against the grain of epic, elegiac, tragic American heroism. Films like

sist the lure of constructing postmodern Ealing comedies, turning back the cinematic clock to a time when every film starred Sid James and Irene Handl. But new versions don't ring true because they're not genuine products of their time, nor are they anywhere near as dark (watch *The Man In The White Suit* with the sound off, and you'd think you were seeing a horror film). Ultimately they're more nostalgic than any period adaptation, and the performance style is absurdly broad. As my mum said

'That's not acting, it's just showing off', but this is from a woman who thought that Isabel Huppert's psychological state in *The Piano Teacher* could have been sorted out with a cup of tea and a chat.

The English are recent converts to sentiment. Writers like Alan Bennett, Charles Wood, Charles Higson and Peter Barnes can afford to be cruel because they are ultimately liberal at heart – as warm, at any rate, as the English ever get. English humour still takes a great deal of explaining. When an American friend asked me what I found so funny about VIZ, I pointed out that you have to filter it through a Beano mentality before the jokes work. I described the appeal of Colonel Blink, the Bash St Kids and Norman Wisdom films. By the time I got around to explaining why most gay men can impersonate Beverly from Mike Leigh's *Abigail's Party*, a filmed play in which a man lies dying of a heart attack on the living room rug, I realised I was in way over my head. Our cruelty is tempered with humour, but it makes us allergic to cuteness – until our fascination with sensual cruelty was replaced by Hugh Grant and the arrival of the BritChickFlick. Peculiar English revival, anyone?

Christopher Fowler



In a Peter Weir film, reality, or our perception of it, is partial. Over the running time, the protagonists break through to a new, or alternative, viewpoint. Such a change in perception doesn't come without its price. He (and it's almost always a man – female leads are rare in Weir's work) often suffers for his insight, and ends the film chastened by the experience, and in a couple of instances actually, or implicitly, dead. Another attribute of his work is an intense attraction to place: a haunted, numinous landscape becomes almost a leading character in his film, whether it be the Australian Outback, urban Sydney, 1960s Indonesia, or present-day or past America. You have to acknowledge the input of key partners, in particular screenwriter David Williamson (two films), composer Maurice Jarre (five), and cinematographers Russell Boyd (four) and John Seale (three). All of these vital to the success of the films on which they worked. It's a tribute to Weir that he is able to return to his preoccupations again and again, while working within the framework of commercial cinema, without for the most part turning out formulaic Hollywood product. (All his feature films from *The Last Wave* onwards have been distributed by major studios.) It's a measure of his versatility that he has been able to deal with his recurring films inside different genres, either fantastic or realistic.

Peter Lindsay Weir was born in Sydney in 1944. He dropped out of University after a year, but had saved enough for a trip to Europe, spending a year in London. Returning to Australia, he took a job with the TV company Channel 7 as a stagehand. While he was there he began making short films. At the time (late 1960s), indigenous film production in Australia had been non-existent since the 1950s, apart from British (*The Overlanders* (1946), *The Shiralee* (1957), Michael Powell's *They're a Weird Mob* (1966) and *Age of Consent* (1969)) and American (*On the Beach* (1959), *The Sundowners* (1963)) productions made on location. Actors and directors who would be prominent in the following decade's 'New Wave' were working elsewhere, in many cases in British television. Tim Burstall's *2000 Weeks* (1968), though critically and commercially unsuccessful, was the first sight of that New Wave. Two international co-productions, Ted Kotcheff's *Wake in Fright* (AKA *Outback*, 1970) and Nicolas Roeg's *Walkabout* (1970) gave the local industry an impetus. The first local box-office hits emerged, broad comedies like Tim Burstall's *Stork* and *The Adventures of Barry McKenzie* (both 1971).

In this climate, Weir was offered his first feature work. Or rather part of a feature, as *Three to Go* was a three-episode film, each (by a different writer and director) focusing on a young Australian at a pivotal moment of his or her life. Weir's segment, 'Michael', features the protagonist torn between his middle-class family background and his counterculture friends. *Three to Go* is not currently commercially available, and I have not seen it. Weir is dismissive of it, but by all accounts 'Michael' is undeniably promising, though flawed. It is also very much of its time, similar in style to the 'youth protest' films that Hollywood was making at the time, following the success of *Easy Rider*.

Weir's next short film, *Homesdale*, is a 52-minute black comedy, shot in 16mm monochrome, about

PETER WEIR'S VISIONS OF ALTERNATIVE REALITIES

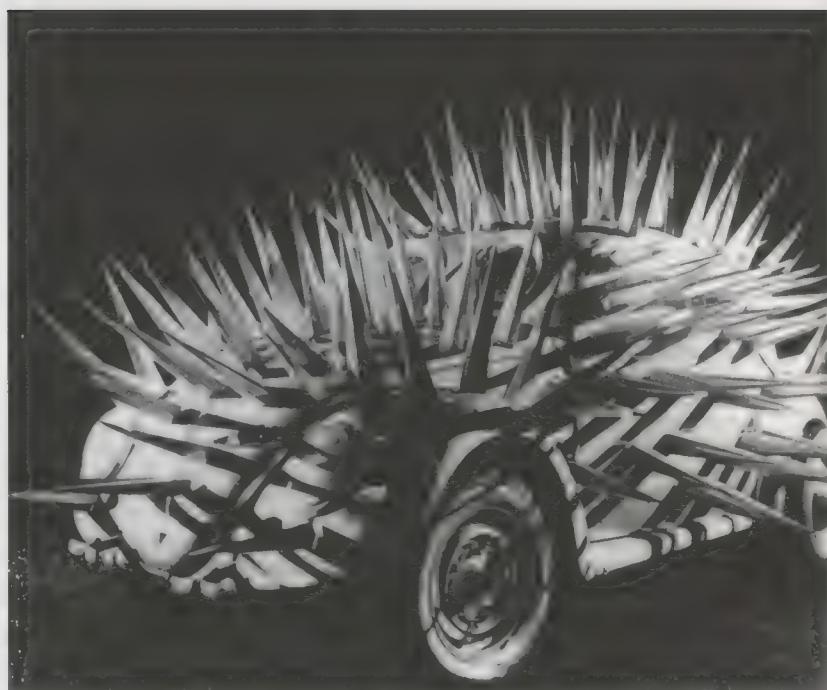
Gary Couzens

a guesthouse on a remote island where residents are encouraged to live out their private fantasies. *Homesdale* was enthusiastically received at the Sydney Film Festival. (However, I have not been able to trace a copy for viewing.) While Weir completed his contract at the Commonwealth Film Unit, he was developing his first feature film, *The Cars That Ate Paris*.

The Cars That Ate Paris begins like a commercial: we watch a couple smoke cigarettes and swig drinks and drive away in a car . . . before going off the road and dying in a crash. Following a similar accident, Arthur Waldo (Terry Camilleri) wakes up in the hospital in the township of Paris. Arthur soon realises that Paris is more sinister than at first appears: the locals scavenge the cars and the crash victims are turned into brain-dead 'vegies'. *Cars* was made on a low budget, and it certainly shows in a film which is distinctly rough around the edges. However, what it lacks in assurance and polish it makes up for in ideas, such as those lethally customised cars. *The Cars That Ate Paris* wasn't a success at the box office, but it at least got Weir noticed. In the USA, it was sold to Roger Corman, who shortened the film from the complete 88 to 74 minutes, redubbed it (Arthur became an American tourist lost in Australia) and retitled it *The Cars That Eat People*. You have to wonder at certain similarities between *Cars* and Corman's later production *Death Race 2000*, though the latter's director, the late Paul Bartel, claimed not to have seen Weir's film before making his. Weir paid tribute to *Cars* by casting Camilleri in *The Truman Show*: he's the man watching the show from his bathtub.

Cars was shot in Scope – an aspect ratio of 2.35:1 – but it has been difficult seeing it in its correct widescreen dimensions outside rare cinema screenings. Australia has not been a country much receptive to widescreen home viewing, so as apparently no widescreen video master existed, the British video release is panned and scanned. Recent British TV showings on Film Four and BBC2 have been cropped to 16:9. At the time of writing, there are rumours that Weir is preparing a DVD release with the US company Criterion, who also distribute superb (region-free) editions of *Picnic at Hanging Rock* and *The Last Wave*.

Weir's next feature, *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, marks the point where the outside world first noticed the renascent Australian film industry. Joan Lindsay's novel claims to be a true story, but it is fiction: on St Valentine's Day 1900, a party of schoolgirls from the exclusive Appleyard College go for a picnic at a strange volcanic formation called Hanging Rock. Three girls, plus one of the teachers, disappear. One, Irma (Karen Robson), is found days later, but the others never are, a mystery unsolved to this day. Not counting Andie MacDowell's co-lead in *Green Card*, *Picnic* is the only one of Weir's films with a woman in the lead role, namely college principal Mrs Appleyard (Rachel Roberts). Right from the start, with scenes of girls dressing, whispering and exchanging love-notes, an atmosphere of powerful, if suppressed eroticism presents itself. The film offers no solution to its mystery, though one way of reading it is as a story of the disappeared girls' succumbing to the erotic power of nature, in the form of the phallic Hanging Rock. *Picnic* is in the tradition of films where the mystery



The Cars That Ate Paris

is subordinate to the effect the mystery has on those who remain, a leading example being Michelangelo Antonioni's *L'avventura*. In the absence of a traditional plot construction (mystery leading to solution), *Picnic* works as a powerful mood piece, with Russell Boyd's exquisite photography to the fore. The soundtrack is vitally important too, featuring George Zamphir's panpipe motif and ominous bass notes.

Weir was never satisfied with the pacing of the second half of the film: when Irma is discovered the story really has nowhere else to go but forty minutes to run. For laserdisc and DVD release, Weir cut nine minutes, making *Picnic* one of the few films with a 'director's cut' actually shorter than the original release. Most of the deleted scenes deal with a subplot where Michael (Dominic Guard), an Englishman staying at the College, befriends Irma and tries unsuccessfully to find out what happened on Hanging Rock. These cuts do tighten a rather rambling last third, but unfortunately they also sideline Michael in the plot, barely justifying Guard's second billing.

Picnic was a considerable success in Australia and overseas, especially in the UK. It was less so in the USA, where it wasn't released until after his next film. However, an American company, United Artists, helped with the financing of that next film, *The Last Wave*. As part concession to the American market, an American actor, Richard Chamberlain, was cast in the lead role. The country, period setting of *Picnic* is replaced by modern, urban Sydney. During spells of freak weather – hailstorms in the Outback, torrential rain – lawyer David Burton (Chamberlain) is defending Aborigines accused of ritual murder. Meanwhile, he is troubled by strange dreams and visions (an Aborigine holding a carved stone, visions of a submerged city). The mystery brings Burton into contact with a tribe of Aborigines living in the tunnels under the city, and legends of catastrophe and renewal, a quest that puts his marriage, and even his sanity, at risk. Finally, he is granted a vision of the Last Wave that engulfs all in its path.

As with its predecessor, *The Last Wave*, lacking

a conventional structure and resolution, is most successful as a mood piece. Russell Boyd's camera-work emphasises greys and blues rather than the golden tones of *Picnic*. However, lacking a firm structure, the film rambles in its second half and the open ending doesn't entirely work. (It doesn't help that, due to budget restrictions, the Last Wave is created from grainy surfing footage.) The film is also open to accusations of sentimentalising Aborigine culture – is killing by death bone any better than Western forms of murder? – though in fairness, the two main Aborigine actors (David Gulpilil from *Walkabout* and Nandjiwarra Amagula, a magistrate in real life) did contribute to their roles.

After *The Plumber*, an effective Hitchcockian suspender made for TV, *Gallipoli* and its follow-up *The Year of Living Dangerously*, marks a new phase in Weir's career. Both were large-scale international productions, featuring rising star Mel Gibson, and both were period pieces. If the two films show a change of direction, much has to be credited to David Williamson. Williamson, a distinguished playwright as well as a screenwriter, wrote such key early 70s Australian films as *Stork*, *Petersen* (both directed by Tim Burstall) and *Don's Party* (directed by Bruce Beresford). He has sole credit for *Gallipoli* (Weir is credited with the story) and shares *Living Dangerously* with Weir and CJ Koch, the writer of the original novel. Williamson is presumably responsible for a greater firmness of script structure, organizing the films around recurring motifs and themes (running in *Gallipoli*, the Indonesian shadow play in *Living Dangerously*). He is also a master of invective and saltily funny dialogue, particularly noticeable in the first film. Both films were superbly shot in Scope by Russell Boyd: along with *Cars*, they are the only Weir films to date in the wider format. Both films move away from the mystical themes of Weir's earlier work towards a firmer grasp of history and politics, possibly also due to Williamson's input.

Gallipoli has a three-act structure, tracing the friendship of Frank (Mel Gibson) and Archy (Mark Lee), from its beginnings in Australia, via an interlude in Egypt to the tragic conclusion at Gallipoli, where huge numbers of Australian soldiers were killed. If nothing else, the film shows Weir's confi-

dence in working on a much larger canvas than before, though thematically and stylistically it is less obviously his own work. What it is, without a doubt, is highly entertaining. In *40,000 Years of Dreaming*, George Miller's personal history of Australian cinema, he rightly singles out the entire final sequence, leading up to a final heartbreaking freeze-frame, as a *tour de force*.

The Year of Living Dangerously is also a fictional story set around real historical events. It's Indonesia in 1965. President Sukarno is in power, but Communist and Moslem factions have brought the country to the brink of civil war. Guy Hamilton (Mel Gibson) is an Australian journalist who faces the question: does a good story override anything, including loyalties to his friends. One of them is Billy Kwan (Linda Hunt), a diminutive Chinese-Australian cameraman, who keeps dossiers on everyone he meets and takes credit for 'creating' Guy (as Christof created Truman?) . . . but his idealism is hurt by Guy's betrayal of both Billy and also Jill (Sigourney Weaver), a British woman whom Billy also loves. Much has been made of the casting of Linda Hunt, a 4'9" tall American woman playing, entirely realistically, a Chinese-American man. Indeed she won an Oscar for this, only her second film role. Billy is at the centre of the film, and we often hear his voiceover: his is a story of a vision and an idealism destroyed by circumstances. By contrast, Weaver cannot do much with an underwritten part. Indonesia on the brink of civil war is superbly captured by Weir, Boyd and production designer Herbert Pinter. *Living Dangerously* is only twenty years old, but it seems like a product of another era: a fully adult (its PG rating notwithstanding), morally complex drama that doesn't insult its audience's intelligence.

With his next film, *Witness*, Weir worked in America, directly for Hollywood studios. For the first time (apart from *Picnic*), Weir didn't take either story or screenplay credit, but the same themes recur, also the strong sense of place. For this and the next two films, his cinematographer was John Seale, who had worked as camera operator on *Picnic*, *Last Wave* and *Gallipoli* and had shot second unit on *Living Dangerously*. On a visit to the city, an Amish boy (Lukas Haas) is the sole witness to a murder. To protect him and his mother Rachel (Kelly McGillis), Detective John Book (Harrison Ford) goes undercover in the Amish Community, scrupulously non-violent and rejecting all modern technology. A tentative romance develops between Book and Rachel: in earlier versions of the script it was consummated, in the finished film it's, more effectively, not. Soon the killers come to track him down, and Book faces a dilemma: should he follow the Amish's creed of non-violence or not? *Witness* is an expertly-made thriller, and was a substantial commercial success.

Weir worked with Ford again in *The Mosquito Coast*, an adaptation of Paul Theroux's novel. Rejecting western civilisation, Allie Fox (Ford) takes his wife (Helen Mirren) and family (including the late River Phoenix as his son) to a new life in Central America. Fox's obsession escalates into near madness, with tragic results. Unsuccessful at the time, *Mosquito Coast* is undeniably flawed. Ford makes a brave fist of an anti-heroic role, but can't overcome basic miscasting. This is a film that might have worked with a 'darker' leading man, and pos-

Gallipoli



sibly a similarly obsessive mind behind the camera: you have to imagine what Werner Herzog would have made of this material. However, there is much worth seeing in this film, and it remains more intriguing than its more feted successor.

That was *Dead Poets Society*, and the locale switches to an exclusive boys' boarding school in the late 1950s. That time is important, partway between the repression of the previous decade (epitomised by the anti-Communist witch-hunts) and the liberation of the following one. The school's English teacher is John Keating (Robin Williams), who preaches free thinking and 'sucking the marrow out of life'. His pupils try to follow this creed, re-establishing the 'Dead Poets Society' that Keating formed when he was a pupil at the school. Neil Perry (Robert Sean Leonard) is torn between his dreams of being an actor and his parents' wishes that he become a doctor. Neil's suicide brings about Keating's expulsion. *Dead Poets Society* is undeniably expertly crafted, and towards the end you may be moved despite yourself. However, despite its critical and commercial success, it's probably the weakest of Weir's Hollywood films, rather too openly manipulative and glossing over any difficulties it raises. Much of this is due to Tom Schulman's screenplay that is rather uncritical of Keating's *carpe diem* philosophy, which is in any case made up of recycled bits of Whitman and Thoreau. Also, Keating doesn't practise what he preaches: if he did, would he be teaching at this school where he was a pupil himself? These are contradictions that the film rather smoothes over. Robin Williams's performance is effective up to a point, but he seems unable to resist (and Weir unable to restrain him from) launching into standard Williams shtick (imitations of Brando and Wayne, amongst others). *Dead Poets Society* is the kind of 'quality' film that Hollywood often makes when it scents Oscars, and comparisons with *Living Dangerously* simply emphasise its shallowness.

Green Card was made outside Hollywood: Weir set it up himself on a small budget as an Australian-French coproduction, distributed by Disney, and acted as producer and scriptwriter as well as director. This film seems intended as light relief after several very serious films: it's an out-and-out romantic comedy set in New York. Bronte Parrish (Andie MacDowell), a horticulturist, wants to rent an apartment with a greenhouse, but it's only available to couples. Georges Fauré (Gérard Depardieu) wants a green card. So Bronte and Georges marry, but they have to convince the authorities they are a genuine couple . . . *Green Card* is a predictable, though certainly entertaining, comedy that pits Georges's Keatingesque life-is-for-living philosophy against Bronte's western uptightness. Weir's outsider's eye gives the New York locations some freshness, though the African motif (jungle drums during the opening credits, and so on, representing primitive, spontaneous urges repressed by 'civilisation') is a little too close to ethnic chic. MacDowell, as Steven Soderbergh showed in *Sex, Lies and Videotape*, very much benefits from a strong script and direction. As for Depardieu, this is probably the best of the early-90s attempts to put him over to an English-speaking audience. In French, he's undoubtedly one of the greatest, most versatile of screen actors; in English, he's always seemed awkward and never really clicked with the Ameri-

can public. *Green Card* is certainly a trifle, but it's a very pleasant one.

At the beginning of *Fearless*, Max (Jeff Bridges) is seen escaping from a crashed plane. Having survived, Max begins to feel that he is invincible, and soon puts this to the test – crossing busy roads, balancing precariously on high rooftops. Soon, his involvement with other survivors brings him back down to earth. *Fearless* earned Rosie Perez an Oscar nomination as a fellow survivor who has lost her baby, but unfortunately failed at the box office. It has picked up something of a cult following since, which makes it one of those films simultaneously under- and overrated. The opening half hour or so is stunning, showing Weir's gifts for uncanny atmosphere at their fullest. Max is compelling at first because Weir and screenwriter Raphael Yglesias (adapting his own novel) don't try to explain his actions, simply to show them. The latter half of the film is less successful, a little too prone to sentimentality, and using a laboured metaphor for life versus death (Max is allergic to strawberries). Once again, Weir's vision is uneasily contained within standard script structure. *Fearless* does stick in the mind, however, and it's a brave attempt that doesn't quite come off.

Five years passed before Weir's next film, *The Truman Show*. Based on a screenplay by Andrew Niccol (who, at about the same time, wrote and directed *Gattaca*), this is the story of Truman Burbank (Jim Carrey). Truman is the star of a TV show watched by millions worldwide – only, he doesn't know it. *The Truman Show* is the brainchild of Christof (Ed Harris), who has had cameras record Truman's every moment. All the other people in Truman's life are actors, from his wife Meryl (Laura Linney) onwards, and he lives in a fake town inside a huge dome. But one day, Truman begins to figure out that all is not what it seems. Jim Carrey is much more restrained as usual, and (to my mind at least) much more effective, and Ed Harris offers excellent support as his 'creator' Christof. Niccol's script is unusually constructed, with most of the major exposition coming at the halfway point, and the focus switching from Truman to Christof. There are logical flaws in the film's premise: notably, if Meryl is a paid actress, does that mean she's paid to have sex with him and even possibly bear his child? The film doesn't really resolve that one, possibly to keep within the bounds of its PG rating. That said, *The Truman Show* is a film of wit, charm, and no little sophistication: although it's an original story, it is close in theme and spirit to the written SF of Philip K Dick.

The Truman Show is Peter Weir's last film to date (though *Master and Commander* is in pre-production as I write this in July 2002), but it shows as well as his earlier films that it is possible to make distinctive work within the commercial film industry. We have come to have high expectations of a Peter Weir film, expecting it to be unusual, distinctive, and atmospheric, and not a Hollywood formula product. And most of the time our expectations are fulfilled.

Acknowledgements While researching this article, I have drawn on *The Films of Peter Weir* by Don Schiach (Lett, 1993), *The Last New Wave* by David Stratton (Angus & Robertson, 1980) and the Internet Movie Database (www.imdb.com). Thanks to Barbara Harrison for the loan of video copies of *Dead Poets Society* and *Fearless*.



The Truman Show



The Last Wave



The Mosquito Coast

FILMOGRAPHY

- 1967 **Count Vim's Last Exercise** [short]
- 1968 **The Life and Flight of the Rev. Buck Shotte** [short]
- 1970 **Three to Go** ['Michael' episode] **Stirring the Pool** [short]
- 1971 **Homesdale** [short]
- 1972 **Three Directions in Australian Pop Music** [short] **Incredible Floridas** [short]
- 1973 **Whatever Happened to Green Valley?** [short]
- 1974 **The Cars That Ate Paris** [US title: *The Cars That Eat People*] **Picnic at Hanging Rock**
- 1976 **Luke's Kingdom** [TV miniseries]
- 1977 **The Last Wave**
- 1979 **The Plumber** [TV movie]
- 1981 **Gallipoli**
- 1982 **The Year of Living Dangerously**
- 1985 **Witness**
- 1986 **The Mosquito Coast**
- 1989 **Dead Poets Society**
- 1991 **Green Card**
- 1993 **Fearless**
- 1998 **The Truman Show**

Every time you move home, you lose a box full of books.

This is an absolute rule: it applies to everyone, every time. Ask your friends. Ask your colleagues, ask your mother, ask your neighbours, ask your brother-in-law. One move equals one box of lost books.

In fact, it was my brother-in-law who first told me about it; Ken, married to my eldest sister. He took me out for a curry not long after I'd moved into my first independent home, a bedsit in Finchley. I suspect the family had sent him round to check that I was surviving – that I hadn't yet become an emaciated, alcoholic, drug-addled recluse. I never had a brother, but I was quite happy for Ken to fill that role. I was eighteen, he was only in his mid-twenties. I looked up to him, and he looked out for me.

We'd pushed our plates away at the end of a satisfying meal, and were just wondering whether to have another beer, or do the adult thing and opt for a coffee, when he asked me if there was anything I'd forgotten to take with me when I moved. If so, he'd be glad to pop round to my parents' place and pick it up in the car.

"There is one thing," I said. "A box."

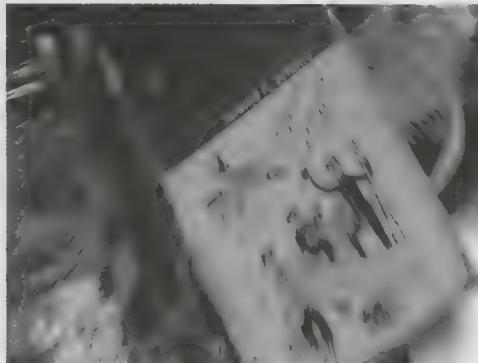
"Ah," he said, smiling as he lit his cigarette. "A box of books, right?"

"Oh, great," I said. "Mum and Dad found it?"

"No," he said, "but go on."

So I told him how my mate Si – the same old school-friend

one box of books



who'd helped me move – had been stopping the night at my flat earlier that week, and how, round about two in the morning, our well-fuelled, wide-ranging discussion had turned to philosophy, and Si had quoted Karl Marx. "Workers of the world unite!" Si had cried, tottering off to the loo, and pausing at the door to give me a shaky clenched-fist salute.

"Ah," I'd told him. "Most people remember the quotation that way, but the actual line is 'Working men of all countries, unite!'. Very significant difference, you see. Has to do with the nature of the nation state."

I probably wasn't articulating quite as clearly as that, but that was the gist. To which Si said, "Are you sure?" and I said, "Hundred per cent. Look, I'll prove it."

In the curry house, Ken smiled again. "But when you got to the bookshelf – no *Communist Manifesto*. Yeah?"

"Yeah," I said. "Which is a bit weird, really, because – "

But Ken interrupted. "And since then? How many other books have turned up missing?"

A few, I admitted. Including a couple of old *Dr Who* annuals – I was particularly miffed about them, because I'd had them all my life, and besides I reckoned they might be worth a bit.

"Well," said my brother-in-law, nodding at the waiter as our beers arrived, "I'll have a look round your mum's place for you, but I can tell you now – you'll never see those books again."

He was probably right, I agreed. In fact, I had an indistinct mental picture of the day of the move – and of Si, the only one

of my friends who had a car, helping me carry boxes of my possessions (books, mostly, and records, plus a couple of changes of underwear and a spare pair of jeans) out to his motor . . . and resting one of the boxes on the roof, while we tried to find a space for it inside the car.

"I reckon we must've driven off with that box of books still on the roof – it was raining, we were in a hurry to get going. I mean, there's no other explanation, is there? I certainly couldn't have lost it in my tiny flat. He always was an absent-minded sod, that Si."

"Sure," said Ken, with a shrug. "Could be. All I know is, every time anyone moves home, they always lose one box of books. Never more than one box, but never *less* than one, either. Just one of those things. I wouldn't waste time worrying about it, Graham."

I nodded in a wry, manly style, the way I generally did when my brother-in-law shared a bit of grown-up wisdom with me. Beyond that, I didn't really think about it. We ordered yet another beer, and the conversation turned to football.

Three years later, I got married. Horribly young, and she was even younger. All those who told us we were doing a crazy thing were undoubtedly right. I can't bring myself to regret it, though. Me and Linda were in love – albeit briefly as it turned out – and how can you possibly regret love? Might as well top yourself, if that's your attitude, and save all the tedious waiting



around.

We couldn't afford to buy a place, but we did manage to rent a really rather cosy one-bedrooomed flat, with a window box, fifteen minutes walk from the Tube in Crouch End. This time, I was not relying on mates with cars. Instead, as our wedding present from her parents – a stingy pair of old miseries, to tell you the truth – a proper removal firm was hired to do the business while we were enjoying our honeymoon (four days in Paris, a gift which almost bankrupt *my* parents, but never mind; a great time was had by all. Except the elderly German couple in the next room, possibly).

We'd been back in London about a week, when Linda and I had a slight row – nothing serious, something to do with whether or not we were going to have Sunday lunch with her parents every bloody week for the rest of our bloody lives – and after an hour or so of cold silence, I went over to our brand new bookshelf to fetch the first gift Linda had ever bought me: a paperback edition of *The Ruba'iyat of Omar Khayyam* (Avery and Heath-Stubbs's starkly powerful modern translation, not the more flowery Fitzgerald). My intention was to resume relations with my wife by means of an appropriate recitation.

But Omar wasn't there.

"Ah, it was in the missing box," said Ken with a sympathetic grimace, when we next met for our regular monthly curry. "That is tough, mate, I am sorry. You've had a good look for it, no doubt?"

mat coward

I had, of course. I'd turned the place upside down. Dismantled the as yet unpaid-for sofa, in case it had somehow slipped down the back – never did manage to get that sofa back together again properly. The book was nowhere in the flat. So I went back to my old bedsit, knocked up the new tenant, persuaded her to let me search. It wasn't there, naturally. "You must have lost it in the move," she said, and shrugged.

I got onto the removal firm: had they by any chance found a –

"Box of books?" said the furniture man. "Oh boy, if I had a penny for every time someone asks me that! No, son, sorry – we haven't got it. Look, believe it or not, my lads *can* tell the difference between a completely empty furniture van, and a furniture van which is completely empty except for one box. All right? We're not idiots and we're not blind."

"I keep wondering," I told Ken, "racking my brains, trying to figure out what else is missing."

"Don't," he said. "Waste of time. You'll find out what isn't there when you find out – and not before. That's how it works."

His *que sera sera* attitude was beginning to irritate me a bit. "You really believe this, do you?" I said. "That every time you move house, you automatically lose a box of books? I mean, come on!"

"I won't try and convince you, Graham," he said. "But you ask anyone."

"So what happens to the books, then?"

member what else had been in the missing box. There seemed to be no way of hurrying the process along. The books weren't missing, until they were missed. Sort of like a quantum physics thing, or Joni Mitchell – 'You don't know what you've got till it's gone' – whichever you prefer.

When my sister died – young and fast, which, sad to say, was the opposite of how she'd lived – I helped Ken move. He sold their house, and most of their joint belongings, and bought a studio flat. We still met for our monthly curries – had done throughout the years, very rarely missing a month – and it was during such a session, a year or so later, that I asked him. Had we, despite all my silent precautions, lost a box of books during his last move?

He didn't return my light-hearted tone. He didn't even try. "Of course," he said. "I told you – every time. That's how it works."

"Go on then," I said, still trying to lighten the mood. "What did you lose this time? Not the early Penguins, I hope – that would leave a gap on your shelves."

Ken managed a smile. "Nothing much. In fact, it was a box of chuck-outs – just a load of paperbacks that I hadn't had time to take down to the Oxfam shop before moving-day."

I was stunned. He'd lost . . . he'd lost effectively *nothing*. A box full of rejects! Surely that couldn't be a coincidence: he must have fixed it somehow. What, was there some kind of knack to this, which he hadn't taught me? The man who'd first shown me how to roll a cigarette so that the tobacco doesn't



"No idea," he said. "Maybe it's some sort of tax? A levy." "What?" I scoffed. "A tax on reading?"

He shook his head. "On everything," he said.

An idea struck me. "OK, so what happens – how about this, then? – what happens if you haven't got any books? If you've never owned a book in your life?"

"Don't speculate," said Ken, with a shudder. "Best not to ponder."

The divorce was not pleasant. Linda's parents not only stuck their oar in, but sharpened it first. We parted in tears and never spoke again.

I moved to Somerset. Ever since leaving school, I'd worked for a chain of electrical retailers, and they had a vacancy for a trainee assistant manager in Bath. I got a mortgage on a two-bedroom terraced house.

Ken helped me move: we hired a self-drive van. On the journey down, and during the next day when he stayed to help me unpack, I caught him looking at me sideways occasionally, but he never said a word about boxes of books. And nor did I.

I was doing a crossword one evening, after I'd been in the new house a couple of weeks, and that was how I came to spend an entire night searching for my French dictionary, the one I'd had since school.

What I hated most about it all, then and after subsequent moves, was waiting for the next discovery – I could never re-

fall out when you light it; the man who lent me my first Raymond Chandler novel . . . This man knew how to lose the right box of books, and he hadn't told me?

And then suddenly it occurred to me to look closer at his face, and I saw immediately that he was lying. I changed the subject; even with the dearest friend, you have to know when not to push things too far. I wondered, of course, what it was that he'd really lost – I still do, now and then. But it's not something I really want to know.

Long after my divorce, long after my sister's death; more than half my life – and many moves, and many boxes of books – behind me; quite recently, I was spending the day in a market town in Yorkshire, and I had an hour spare before my train left. I did what I always do in such circumstances: went for a mooch around the local second-hand book shops.

These days, that mostly means charity shops, and it was in one such that I found a very nice old copy of *Three Men in a Boat*, thrillingly under-priced at one pound fifty. Delighted, I picked it up and flipped through it, and saw my name pencilled on the fly leaf. My name, in my hand. Unmistakable.

I could clearly remember where I'd lost it. Or rather, when. It had been in a box of books that showed up missing following a move from one house to another in Bath. A decade ago.

The shop was empty except for me and the old man behind the counter. I took the book over to him. He smiled, checked

the price, and slipped it into a bag. "One of my favourites," he said. "Nice copy, too."

I didn't answer immediately. I was concentrating, trying to bring to my mind one specific box of books, amongst so many. "You don't happen to have . . ." It was almost there, on the edge of my memory.

"Yes?" said the man. "Something else? I'll be happy to check for you."

"Clifford D Simak," I said, my voice full of triumph, as first the author and then the title returned to me. "It's called *Way Station*. A science fiction classic. Paperback, an American edition."

He frowned. "Do you know, that does ring a bell. Have a look on that carousel over there, just by the coats. That's it, bottom shelf. Got it? Is that the one?"

It was. I checked the fly leaf: my name, in my hand.

"Did these happen to come in in the same batch, do you know? These two books."

He looked puzzled, and a little concerned. I took the Jerome K Jerome out of the bag, put it on the counter next to the Simak, opened them both to the flyleaf.

"Ah," said the man. "I see why you ask. Yes, quite possibly, the same donor -"

"These two books weren't donated," I interrupted. "At least not by the man named here. Because that's me."

"Oh, dear - are you saying they were stolen from you? Is this a police matter?"

I'm afraid. I'm sure you understand."

I grabbed him by the thin lapels of his corduroy sports jacket, and hauled his face close to mine. There wasn't much of him, but what there was I had hold of, and I wasn't letting go. I couldn't remember ever having felt such violent rage before.

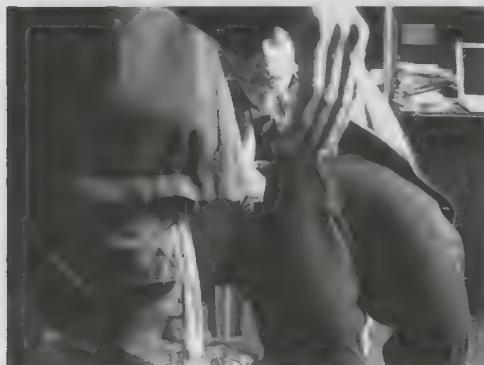
"They are *my* books," I said, my words slow and distinct. "They are my books and I want them back and while you're at it I want all the others back, too - every book I've ever lost in every box in every move I've ever made, I want them all back, or else."

The old man's silence asked me the obvious question: *Or else what?*

I put him down. "Look," I said. "I'm not a thug. I just want what's mine. And I want to know what this is all about."

The old man straightened his jacket, and brushed his sleeves with his palms. "Why?" he said, his voice shaky but his face unafraid. "Why do you want them? They're only books, books that you've already read. And as for what all this is *about*, as you put it - you think there's some great mystery? It's simple: you can't leave a place without leaving something behind. That is, surely, the most banal statement of the obvious imaginable: that you lose something each time you move on. Of course! Goes without saying, as anyone who's lived any kind of normal life, with its normal share of pain and disappointment and bewilderment and love, will tell you. Ask anyone."

My anger had bled away, its absence filled with an enervating



"I'm not sure if they were stolen or not," I said. "I've always assumed they were . . . well, lost."

The man looked at me, looked at the books, then nodded slightly. "Ah. I think I understand. Lost while you were moving home, is that it?"

"What do you know about that?" I demanded.

"Only what everyone knows. That every time you move home -"

"No," I said. I was certain I was reading his face correctly. "You know more than that. Tell me, or I *will* call the police."

The charity shop man looked down at his feet for several minutes, running a forefinger back and forth across his lips. At last, he said: "People hoard books. Even people who are not by nature hoarders. Half the homes in this country contain a spare bedroom lined with shelves packed with books that have already been read - and which in most cases, will never be read again. No longer books; mere dust-collectors."

"What are you telling me?" I said.

"I'm telling you nothing. I am making general observations, as one reading man to another. But you tell me: is that the best place for a book? On a shelf?"

His words were unexceptional, his manner perfectly inoffensive, but somehow I felt uneasy, as if I were in some way being censured, or controlled. I pointed at the two books. "How much do I owe for these two?"

"I'm sorry," said the old man. "I can't let you take those,

sadness. "But they're my books," I said. "I still want them."

He tutted. "Of course you still want them. Wouldn't be much point otherwise, would there? You, sir, will eventually come to realise, as all men must, that if you are lucky - *very* lucky, I mean - then all you ever lose, each time you change your address, is your statutory one box of books."

I knew I'd lost more than that, much more than that over the years, but the point was the books were *here*, the rest was out of reach. I picked up both my books. The old man made no attempt to grab them from me. He took out a pipe, filled it and lit it.

"I could go round every second-hand bookshop and charity shop and junk shop in the country," I said. "I could make a list, I could use the internet."

"You could," he agreed. "But books move, too, you know. You'd have to be remarkably fly to catch them."

There was no malice in his eyes, but a hint of sympathy, and as I stood there, staring at my missing books, I knew this, as well: that no matter how much you lose, you could always lose more. "I miss them all," I said.

And he took my Simak and my Jerome from my unresisting hands, and replaced them on the carousel.

Mat Coward's latest crime novel, *In & Out*, is published by Five Star in the USA, and collection of his short stories will be out shortly from the same publisher. *Success . . . And How To Avoid It* is out soon from TTA Press (order it now - turn to the blue form).

THE PRODUCER



STEVE MOHN

It's like that kid who got the other kids to paint the fence white. Everyone else says they do the hard work then *we* get the credit. But the only way this bizz works is if it's controlled by people with no taste and no scruples – who *do not* care. We get the butts into the seats. Most of those butts belong to people who it doesn't matter which end they think with. Same result. We show them beautiful boys and girls smart-mouthing their way through cool, dangerous stuff. Camera-grinders called directors do tricks to make you identify with people who do not and cannot exist anyway. At what point in this do brains kick in?

I charge people to watch other people live the lives they'd rather have. And I've made a pile. I am a very, very, very rich man.

So I'm at my desk, listening to Fat Apple crank out 'End It'. I'm supposed to get a signal on the headphones if someone shows up with no appointment, which is never 'cause I don't just *see* people. So when the 'phones stop working, I wait. But nothing. I take the 'phones off, turn in my chair to tap the key and say, "Darlisha?" – and here are two guys.

Silver all over. Not metal. Really sleek fur that's shiny but I see separate hairs? They see my face and sit back on their butts and fold their arms, or front legs, and look at me. They have small dark eyes. If they'd had big almond-shaped eyes, like every cute alien since *Close Encounters*, I'd be ha ha, very funny, you're fired, or I'd be more like this isn't happening, someone do something.

Then I'm thinking: How did they do that? This is what we do out here – we do FX. How did they project these pretty silver guys in my office? It's a cool FX, 'cause if you can just bonk this into people's houses, with no set-up, then maybe the movies are over and some kind of terrorism takes its place – like, I scare the shit out of you or you pay me money. And I'm thinking this could be great. I'm always up for the next *it* thing, like when those camera-grinders wept and tore their sackcloth over digital when it replaced Film? because Film had a grain pattern? *Grain*?

I'm sitting with my mouth open, my hand parked off to one side like I'm about to ask, "Who . . ." before I draw a circle with my fingers and finish, "let you into my office?" and give my head a little shake that says I am a very important man in this town and my security will not only remove you from

the building, they will cause you to haemorrhage. But I don't say that 'cause one of them puts its feet, or hands, on my desk, tilts her head (it looks female, or like some killer queen) and says with this mouth like a praying mantis: "Producer?"

I go, "This is like a skill test on a lottery ticket?" and draw that little circle with my hand . . .

The one leaning on my desk looks back at the other one, then looks at me and says, "Eustace, you are producer?"

Eustace! No one calls me that. I am *Stace Lewis Evans*, as in *A Stace Lewis Evans Production*. I had a partner once, a crash-and-burn case, very sad. But I'm in no mood to hear this pitch.

I park my hand palm up, give my head the tiniest shake and say, "Out."

She pushes off my desk and lands on her knuckles. Then they both aren't there anymore. *Not* there. Anymore.

I realize there are just two things – everything I care about, which is me, and everything I don't, which is everything else. This is about me – something wrong with me, with my head, where *me* lives.

In the washroom I wash my face then lean on the sink and look at myself. I am handsome. Lots of wavy blond hair. Blue eyes, fair skin. I am lean and buff and my piss runs clear as a mountain stream.

I have never in my life paid for it. I have on occasion been begged. All the gifts have showered on me. I do not feel guilty. I am genetically superior. It happens. So I'm annoyed that, at thirty-three, going on a billion net worth, pieces of my brain are falling out on the floor.

I put on a black biker jacket and leave, telling Darlisha, "You're fired," on the way out in case she had anything to do with those guys. I take my elevator to the garage and pick a car, any car. They're just cars since they stopped burning gas.

I was born near Syracuse, New York, so Los Angeles strikes me as perfect. But this new humidity sucks. I simmer and yak on a dead headset. I like being seen this way but just now I don't want to talk. This is how I talk to myself. I can't in the office. It's gotta be bugged. There are people who want a juicy piece of my ass on the grill so I have to take all these precautions.

"And now I'm losing my mind," I tell the humidity. "I should leave, buy a space

station and go there. I can afford one." But I did one of those parabolic flights to see what being weightless is like and ralphed all over so I guess I won't be living on a thing that looks like an Erector Set fucking Tinker Toys. I've seen them FX-ed into so many movies the whole thing is stale. For what they cost to put up I could do some product that would get the butts into the seats and who cares if it's real? Were those guys in my office real?

I feel too many envious eyes on me so I power up the accordion top and all the tinted glass to encapsulate myself in cool dry air and tropical river white noise and black leather so soft and warm it moans when you stroke it with your fingers and gives off this scent? So expensive it's weird. Still I feel these envious eyes. I could pave my driveway with nude women and park on them, get out, take a leak and *shake* it and they wouldn't complain. It's that kind of town. When you realize what power you have over people: amazing. I mean, I think you could eat them, you know? But I don't like being recognized and stared at. First, there's a chance of being grabbed. Second, I just don't fuckin' like it.

Suddenly, there they are, in the car in front of me, looking out the back at me and talking to each other with their praying mantis mouths that move from side-to-side. I have seen one praying mantis in my life, in a bush, eating one of those black caterpillars with a rust-red stripe? Chewing it head-first? It looked at me, turned its head, like: Who are you, I'm eating! And they're insects, so they have eye shells, except a mantis has two dots in the middle? Like pupils? These eyes are like that.

Then I get a fax. I have all this gear in the car – phone, fax, computer, TV. It's a two-seater, cell car, Chinese job, dripping water on the tollway. I watch fax curl out, covered in tiny print like the vampire writing in *Blade*? I'm s'posed to *read* this? I feed it to the shredder.

The tollway's a parking lot. All I see are the gleaming tops of low, flat cell cars sitting in steam from the water dripping out and boiling off the composite. There's a dome of light in the west, kind of thermonuke orange. I watch it burn down to red then purple and wonder if I'll get that green sunset thing they talk about. But no. The fax stops curling out, shredder takes the last page, those aliens are gone from the car just

ahead, or maybe it was some other car. I call Sheldon.

Sheldon's one of these people you can call anytime; he lives in Antarctica and it's always the same time there. I've never understood what he does exactly but he's loaded. He takes my calls 'cause I'm loaded.

"Hi, this is Sheldon. I am unavailable forever. Believe me. Bye."

I get a feeling something's going on but I can't say what. I watch the end of that last fax crawl into the shredder.

Tollway eases up. I get home. Yell at this sort-of butler I employ, tell him to get out, then chase my maid, this dragon lady? you just wanna put tape over her mouth? She gets away so I kick back and watch some wall.

Shuttle launch. Bor-ring! Big production, no story. It's like they've been putting them up one a week and the pain-in-the-ass barking the headlines at me is going, like, this is the second one today? and *what* is going on? and I'm like: Bite it! and flip to a channel where the pain-in-the-ass is barking exactly the same way? So I know it's a major story. I fix a drink, loosen my tie, kick my shoes off.

Last two shuttles to go up haven't come down, says the pain. Some heads talk. I watch this, thinking: Why do I have this frigging SuperPanavision Hi-Def wall and all that's on is talking head? It makes me want the shuttle back and, like they read my mind, which they should do more often, I get shuttles and think: Bor-ring! Shuttles just hang there, not even exploding, guys in thick white suits not even dying let alone shooting lasers, whole thing so static I actually listen to what the pains are saying:

PAIN ONE: Is there any indication that federal employees have been favored in the selection process?

PAIN TWO: No, and that in itself is unusual, as it seems the case may be that no such criticism has been made or even suggested, let alone denied.

And I'm thinking: What? And the phone trills. "What."

"Producer?"

"Who's this?"

"Eustace, you are producer?"

"Yeah, I am producer. Hit me."

"Aliens who dwell in dead star passing through solar system will destroy humankind – "

"Been done. What's the hook?"

"All responsible official flee, leaving bulk
of mankind to face - "

"Cut to the vein. Who's the Willis? The
Arnold? Who gets the babe?"

"Eustace, we see you in charge."

I tilt my head to get the ball bearing into
the hole. "What?"

"Only player left."

I lean into the phone. "Excuse me - what
planet are you from?"

It says something but I don't catch it for
the static. I think: Yeah, right, I'm from there
too. I click off the phone, thumb it to reject
that number and throw it at a couch across
the room. Enough. Long day. I sort through
a couple of remotes and find one that flips
the wall into a game called *This Earth I Rule*.
I play it with eight other guys. One's a banker,
one's a software giant, one has a drug
cartel. I'm the only producer. I'm Australia.
I'm emperor. I personally execute my ene-
mies and all the money has my picture on
it. I've extended my empire over the Pacific
to Nevada and Oregon and Lower California.
I've nuked my way into China and India. I
have many, many slaves. But Kazakhstan,
an arms dealer with whom I have alliances,
is making a push into China and India. Time
to betray him. I seed the subcontinent with
anthrax mines, put my main forces in Peking
and isolate Japan, a holdout that has fiend-
ishly annoyed me, pop it all onto the net,
then sit back to surf the take from the 9,000
multiplex screens on which I have product.
It looks pretty good. I flip back to the game
to see if anyone's moved.

Nothing. Weird 'cause we hit this game
at least once a day. But nothing. No response.
I hit REVIEW to get the past twenty-four. *Nada*,
except for my stuff. I hit REVIEW again, again.
It's like: Dude, where's the game! They're
not playing? I figured they were stalling, to
see what I'd do.

I'm starting to get it. I grab that phone I
threw and speed-dial through my A-list of
people who always return my calls and
whose calls I always return. No one picks
up. I dig out my pager and two-way all over.
At the same time I'm zapping wall and it's
space shuttle, space shuttle, and here some
rocket on a pad, there shots of crowds pushing
back lines of soldiers who start shooting
into them with actual guns. And I'm like:
Oh.

I get out to LAX. I don't drive. Tollways are

choked. I copter. It takes some time to get
one to come out and pick me up off the roof
but that gives me time to order my jet fuelled
and crewed. All the way I'm going like
a madman, "Yes, I'll take you with me! Yes,
I will pay you fifty times the usual!" This is
THE END and if I don't get to Cape Canav-
eral, I am the chicken, buk-buk-baducking
its way across the road, and life is the truck.

Copter touches down. I run for the pri-
vate jet hangers. They are nowhere near
the copter pad so it's a long haul. I'm on
the phone, tracking down every bootlick I
figure I can still threaten with dismember-
ment and be even halfway believed. But it's
like the whole bizz has left town, they're
off scouting locations? No one picks up.
Worse is the sheer number of people I have
to barge past and knock down and trample
just to get where I'm going.

When I reach the private hangars I'm
soaked with sweat, panting. It's like the
phone has fused itself to my ear. All I've
tracked down is one bootlick, a kid I have
hated for years. I think we're related. I tell
him I want my SUV - yes, the gas-burner
with a full tank in the VIP garage at Miami
- on its way to Orlando before I can draw
my next breath. "Stay off 95, stay off the
turnpike. Use US 27 no more than you have
to. Stick to back roads. There's two extra
gas cans, a Glock in the compartment and
ten extra clips. Anybody fucks with you,
you kill them and *meet me in Orlando!*"

I smack the phone shut between both
hands and there's this guy named McCready
who flies my jet, this dogface in his goddamn
white shortsleeved shirt, standing at the
bottom of these foldout steps with this look
on his face, a kind of smile you never see
except on drunks and people who've just
lost their mothers. And I'm like: "Why isn't
this fucking plane in the air - don't you
know what's going on?" and he's like: "All
set, Mr Evans." I get in and strap in, hit the
phone in the plane. I get the bootlick 'cause
he's the only one I *can* get back.

He's not even at the frigging Miami air-
port!

"Stace!" he goes (I could kill him for call-
ing me Stace, like he *knows* me? But I need
this little wad). "There's traffic like you never
seen, man, and there's riots and shit?" and
I'm: "Don't you have a gun, can't you shoot
your way in?" and he's: "Yeah, but there's
pigs, man, and worse, all over!" I throw
him bones of praise and dangle carrots of

money and pussy, and he swears he'll get
to Miami.

I get off the phone and make a drink,
take a leak, drink the drink. By then the
plane is moving, taking its place on the run-
way. I look out and see this line that moves
like the jets have their wheels sunk in con-
crete that's starting to set? THE END. We'll
never get off. I still don't know what the
panic is, and that's when I wonder if anyone
knows. Maybe it's a media thing like that
guy with Mars, on the radio, and some idiots
in Jersey believed it? I try the TV but the
head looks like he's never talked to a lens
before. Prob'lly not. Prob'lly all the regular
anchors are out there hanging off the shuttle
wings.

I get up to make another drink and the
jet lurches all to one side. I *blam* my head
on an armrest and see this burst of light, a
big splash of yellow on black. I'm not hurt.
But I don't get right up. Seems like the jet's
lurching along and I'm thinking: McCrea-
dy's gonna *drive* to Orlando? I stay on the
floor, looking out at a smear of sky that's
not exactly dark because it never really does
get dark around here. Then this wing goes
by and I'm like: Okay. Then another goes
by and I see this big engine hanging off it
like a scrotum? So I'm looking at the under-
sides of wings. Another goes by and I get it.
McCready's going to the head of the line.
We're so small we scoot right under the
wings of these dirigibles. I'm like: Dude!
I didn't think McCready had it in him. We
start going faster and the wings go by a lot
faster. Engines are screaming. We come up
under another wing but this one doesn't
go by. We sort of stay with it. It pulls ahead,
falls back. 'Cause we're in the air, rising
under this wing as *it* rises, and I can't even
hear myself shriek.

But the underside of that wing goes up
and up. I see landing gear fold like duck
feet into the bottom as we peel off to one
side. I roll against a seat and climb into it
like I'm two.

I drink to McCready, to the bootlick, who
had better be driving over bodies to get my
SUV to Orlando, to the people who built
my jet and change the oil. I drink to my
silver guys and, pretty soon, I'm ready to
go up and thank McCready for getting this
crate in the air and being so kick-ass brave.
Figure I'll give him some money. The co-
pilot too. I didn't see him before. It's always
a different guy.

I don't knock 'cause it's my plane. I just go in. It's always dark in a cockpit, so they can see their lights. McCready doesn't turn, doesn't hear me. I sag against the door frame and squint at the co-pilot, trying to see if I know him.

But I don't know anyone with a big black hole in the side of his head and blood exploded onto his shoulder and all down his front. This is what I see and it doesn't speak to me somehow, as if I had said, 'ice' and he said, 'steam shovel', then we just looked at each other. Hard to be sure when I finally get this figured out. Co-pilot is shot, co-pilot is dead . . . he wasn't a very good co-pilot? Suddenly I am so sober, as if I have not been sober in years, and one night I woke up sober. I was clean. The air was clean. I breathe in cold air through my mouth, smelling brand new shiny iron nails – blood smells like nails and that makes me think of Masters' Hardware at Main and North in Marcellus, near Syracuse.

Slowly I slide my eyes toward the back of McCready's fat neck. He has both hands on that cut-in-half wheel planes have. Has his headphones on. His image hangs on the glass, or perspex. He doesn't seem to see me. I back out slowly, so if he does see me he might think I haven't seen the co-pilot yet.

McCready sees me, turns his head. He's been crying, maybe about shooting the co-pilot. Or shooting me next because he points the gun at me. I look into a hole. It is the deepest hole in the world. Light kisses the bullets in the chambers, like ICBMs in their silos.

"I just wondered when we'd get to Orlando." Like wood, I say it.

McCready says, "We're not going to Orlando, Mr Evans."

I go, "Oh."

"We're going to Syracuse."

I don't know what to say.

McCready says, "My wife is in Syracuse."

"Okay," I say, nodding.

"My daughter," he says, "is in Syracuse."

I keep nodding. "Well . . . we should . . . go to Syracuse."

"I'm sorry, Mr Evans."

"That's okay. That was a great take off."

"Please return to your seat, Mr Evans."

"Okay." I back out.

"And shut the door, please."

"Okay." I close the door gently and go down on my knees and wet myself and it

feels so good to do that, I just keep doing it.

There's a giving-up point you reach. I hit mine in the air some place over Indiana maybe or Kentucky. I don't get off the floor and carefully walk myself to a seat for any reason. I just do it. Biology does it, or the *me* in my head. Fifty-fifty, we'll never land in Syracuse. Up in the cockpit, old McCready will take a notion and aim this can into the dirt. Or land and find his wife and daughter so he can shoot them personally.

My pants are soaked. I think I have fresh clothes aboard. In a moment I'll check. I'm getting a rash but I can't get up yet. Then the phone trills. "What."

"Stace?"

"What."

"It's Sheldon."

"Sheldon."

"Stace, you okay?"

Stace thinks about it. "No."

"Where are you?"

"Somewhere over the United States of A Merry-Go-Round."

A pause, rather long. Cut away to shot of a clock going

tick

tick

tick

to show how long.

Sheldon says: "Why aren't you on the shuttle?"

Hold on close shot of Stace going: Uh . . .

"I'm going to Syracuse," I finally tell Sheldon.

"Oh," he says. "Then you'll get to the Cape?"

I shut my eyes, take a breath and say, "Prob'lly not."

"Stace, you gotta pull it together. This thing's gonna happen. You gotta get down to that shuttle and get on."

"Get on . . . Sheldon, where *are* you?"

"On the Alpha. The international station. I been here a week. Everybody's here. Others are on Big Beta. Stace, why aren't you here?"

I ask him to tell me what's going on. And it's this. A dead star is passing through our system, it's like a ball of degenerate ash, and it has all this gravity? And as it passes it'll pull the Earth out of its orbit to where it's too cold to live.

Sheldon says, "And you didn't *know*?"

"I was in Hollywood." Saying it makes me wish I could smash Hollywood with one

of those mother asteroids like Bruckheimer used on Paris. "Guess I just wasn't paying attention."

He says, "Stace, the whole world – "

"I was not. Paying. Attention."

I'm running through all the reasons why I would never produce this. Just off the top of my head, studies show that people don't like movies set where it's cold. Then Sheldon helps me find a better reason.

"So we all just bugged out, daddy. We had the dough to get things rolling before too many people copped to what we were doing? And we're gonna push both rigs way the hell off the highway, then see how things settle out."

There's something so wrong with the concept I actually consider it – like I raise my hand, teacher calls on me, whole world goes: Stace is right!

"Long story short," I say, "maybe a hundred people get saved, and the rest just don't have a chance?"

Sheldon says, "Right."

"And it's just too bad there aren't more shuttles and stations?"

"Right, exactly."

"And you can live out there . . . ?"

"A while," he goes. "Long enough."

"Sounds like another reason we should have a space program."

Sheldon laughs. "Yeah! Right!" Really cracks up.

I put the phone on the floor and stomp on it till it's in pieces then kick the pieces everywhere, thinking I can't be the only one feeling this way, there must be people in the military, people who know how to launch and aim missiles and blow space stations apart.

We land in Syracuse. I have to hand it to old McCready, he got us there in one piece. He comes out of the cockpit. "G'night, Mr Evans." I sort of wave, half expecting him to shoot me. I would. I haven't always been nice to McCready. I haven't always been nice. Then I get up and look in the cockpit, wondering if I could possibly get this thing refuelled. So I *can't* fly – at a time like this . . .

But I would just crash and burn. And there's that co-pilot sitting there. So I go through the cabin and, yes, there are clothes. A shower too. I use it, get cleaned up, dress, go through the cabin again. Find a soft carry bag and fill it with booze, cigars, the dope

I'd forgotten, figuring these things will be money on the way, or a way to help myself out later. Help myself *out*, I think as I hit the tarmac.

It's night still but light in the east. I'm glad of the biker jacket, just right for this weather. There are three hundred sixty-five days during which the sun can shine and Syracuse misses most of them. Then I remember it's going to get cold, then I think: Cold will be the least of it. There will be earthquakes of biblical proportion, tsunamis, volcanoes, maybe half the asteroid belt being dragged in by this dead star thing.

I hit the road. I would walk to Marcellus, the town I grew up in – see out the world there. Maybe meet some people I knew back then, maybe avoid them. I would find the house I lived in, the bedroom I jerked-off in. Take a last look, that long look they talk about.

Shot of Stace, walking. It's daylight now. I follow 81 to the lake, cut across following the Conrail and go under 690 into Solvay, find Route 5 and follow that to Camillus. Some of it's industrial but most is residential. Along the way there are cars but I don't try to hitch a ride. They're all going too fast and are piled too high. I pass a lot of accidents that look deliberate, see a pickup swerve to hit a guy then back up to make sure, like it's personal?

It's after I leave Camillus, about noon, following 174 into the country, that I feel like I'm going back in time. Not many houses. Marcellus is a town where nothing changes, just crumbles more. If I go back in time far enough THE END may get farther away.

Where the railroad crosses the road on a stone arch I cut up into the trees, find a path I used to walk, find the mossy stones of a mill I used to play on, then come out on Limeledge, my road. I'm wiping tears with my sleeve 'cause no one will be home. Boxy houses line the road. Some look familiar but even my own does not. The color, trees, shrubs and additions, the roof – all different. But this is it. I go around back, where I can see the whole town spread out in a valley, and set my bag on the grass. Take out a bottle, a big cigar, fire it up. Looking due east, there's a full chalk Moon in the sky. I'm thinking it's a quarter of a million miles away because there is also a huge pale lavender dome, like a bowl inverted over Syracuse or one of those enor-

mous moons in a movie on some planet where the moon's too close?

And *our Moon*, the Moon that we all know what it looks like, is in *front* of this great big lavender dome. In *front* of.

I just sit there looking at it, running my tongue back and forth on my lip, tasting whiskey, the cigar, the air, smelling the grass. What will it be like when I die, when the dead star's gravity sucks me up into space?

The cigar goes out. I feel in the bag for a lighter but come up with my two-way. Just to see, I run through its digits: *Stace here, waiting for the end. Anybody love me?* At this point, I would accept abuse. I have a lot of names in here. I keep going to the next. Nothing.

Then, from the corner of an eye, I see two silver guys.

In the sunlight they're a shiny silvery blue, more feline than I had noticed before, but with mantis mouths and small dark eyes. Something teenaged about them. One sits on her haunches and tilts her head. "Producer!"

I toss the two-way back in the bag. It's weird they never tried me through my pager. Stopped at the office, faxed, called. But didn't two-way. I look at her, or it. She seems real. Grass crackles when she moves. A breeze disturbs her fur. She smells like potatoes.

"What do you want me to produce?"

She points at the giant lavender dome. "Response to offer."

I don't follow 'cause I'm picturing Sheldon and those guys screwing the rest of us, but seeing myself up there with them, opening the air valves? "Offer?"

She considers, then says, "Welcome to our world!"

I'm really ready to throw things at her but all I have is liquor and I'm sure I'll need it. I wave at that dome, the scale of it set off by a Moon I know to be itself very big. And it clobbers me. I can't grasp it. How big is the ash of a star? 'Cause that's what the big dome is. All I see is a third of it. How big will the ash of our sun be when it burns out? They don't all turn into black holes or go nova. Some just get cold. A guy pitched a story once, is how I know. It's how I know what I'm seeing. And it's prob'ly not even all that close yet, like out around Mars?

That dirty red smear on one side of the dome maybe is Mars.

I feel her hand on my shoulder so I sit up to take her hand, partly to see if it's real

(it is and it's warm and bony, furry and tough, like a very old glove) and partly to make her listen as I point at that enormous dome, which I imagine as metallic and smooth all over, just faintly reflective. Also, noticeably bigger than it was a few minutes ago. It must be moving in really –

Moving in, thinks I. Moving. In. Welcome to our world.

Yes, I'm slow. But inside that lavender dome – is where we all go.

When they open it.

They smash the Moon to shit but we slide in when they open this big blue hole in their burned-out star.

'Cause I told these guys they have a Go-picture. I'm a producer. What I do.

Now we orbit a light in the center of this globe of degenerate la-dee-dah. I don't care what it is or who they are. They make the light, this Earth I sort of rule.

"Sheldon! How's it hanging – up there in hang-land?"

"Stace," he whispers. "Loving, most-tender and merciful god-thing!"

"How's the old muscle tone, Sheldon? Those low red counts? The calcium loss? Your piss must be white as milk from calcium loss! You drinking a great big glass every day? Oh, right – it won't stay in a glass, will it? Tricky!"

I kid these guys. If they hadn't skipped out to save their butts we'd be doing this together. But Stace Lewis Evans, on the ball, was the only thing that looked like a government. These aliens have scruples: they get in touch when they total a system.

It is so like the kid who got the other kids to paint the fence white! I like to go out evenings, lean on my fence and watch the Alpha and Big Beta orbits decay. Our sky is a map of plains and rivers, oceans and mountains as-if printed on the inside of that dead-star globe. In a few dozen years we'll all be out there. Then the silver guys will take the Earth apart to make more mountains, pour more water in the oceans. Right over there, between those two chasms that sort of make a fork? is where I'm building Black Star Studios. What else? Do you see that audience? Am I not the greatest producer? Did I not green-light the saving of the world? Dude!

Steve Mohn's stories and film essays appear regularly in *On Spec*, and his reviews and essays in *The New York Review of Science Fiction*. Steve lives in Montreal.



Alan Moore is the most influential and significant comics writer of his generation, author of *Watchmen*, *From Hell*, *V for Vendetta*, *Swamp Thing* and the entire ABC line of books and magazines. Last issue, in the first part of this interview, he discussed the relationship between magic and writing, the British visionary tradition, and his new CD *Angel Passage* (RE: PCD04, with music by Tim Perkins), based on the life of William Blake. He also, with blessing from the Pentagon, explored the unique characteristics of the comic book medium.

TL: What is the fascination so many UK writers have with the Victorian age? Is it nostalgia, or perhaps a way of dealing with the would-be neo-Victorianism of the Thatcher era? *From Hell* seems rooted in peculiarly English notions of the 'enemy within', as, in different ways, was *V for Vendetta*.

AM: The Reagan-Thatcher master-race fuck-buddy coalition of the 1980s (now there was a good old-fashioned comic book *Axis of Evil*) did almost unimaginable damage to the Western cultural fabric, with its 'There is no Society' free market pitch, its implication that the only sane approach to life was to look out for number one, since that, presumably, was just what everybody else was doing. In a world where every human value is made relative to profit margins, then morals and meaning bleed away to leave dead air, to leave an ethic vacuum that it may take decades to refill. Derelict structures, bleached of all importance, that might never mean anything, ever again, to anyone.

In such a cultural void, where money is become the only yardstick of significance and worth, then all art (or anything else that pertains to the human experience on more than a grossly material level) is likely to be both debased and degraded, whether it be the supposedly inviolable classics of the past, or the work that's without doubt under construction at this very moment, bound for a Charles Saatchi exhibition somewhere. All that can be usefully attempted is to reinvest the strip-mined cultural and moral landscape with its ransacked meaning, to transform the council reservations and surveillance camera stage sets with an alchemy of the imagination. There is no obstacle, even within highly competitive and economics-driven fields, that can't be dreamed around. Morally centreless and callous, the regime imposed by voodoo economics might yet be undone by voodoo art. Or just plain voodoo.

History's a rolling, mounting wave of information, and the more time passes, the more information is accumulated, with greater density and detail. The Victorian period is probably no more than a particularly dense, particularly fertile territory for writers to explore. For writers in the UK, more specifically, it maybe represents a period when notions of the British character and British way of life were massively enlarged, inflated to ridiculous cartoon extremes. Most cultures, at one time or another,

PART TWO

FROM HELL AND BACK

ALAN MOORE INTERVIEWED BY TIM LEES



other, will raise empires, pass through periods of monstrous hubris and inevitably turn into grotesque, hilarious parodies of themselves. The Germans. The Americans. The British. When a culture hits one of those dizzy peaks of self-caricature, we see it standing naked with its dreams and vanities and shrivelled aspirations dangling. It's as if a culture's never more itself than when it's puking drunk on power, incontinent with money, standing with its skidmarked ermine trousers round its ankles and demanding it be brought third-world states to sodomize. Victorian Britain was thus Britain in extremis, all its Gilray flaws and warts exposed and magnified, its grubby mechanisms in full view, with obvious attractions for an author.

One of the early inspirations for *From Hell* was Thatcher's rant about returning to 'Victorian values', prompting an investigation into just exactly what those values might have been. A hansom cab in every garage, a freshly-rogered child up every chimney and a gutted whore in every gutter. With *V for Vendetta* on the other hand, the impulse, while historical, was not specifically Victorian, with the main character emerging as a kind of archetypal composite, constructed from folk-culture icons such as Mr Punch and Guy Fawkes, quoting from Shakespeare, Marlowe, Enid Blyton, growing roses named after supporting actresses from *Coronation Street*. The only real concession to Victoriana in the strip is that the central figure has his most obvious antecedents in the shadowy pulp villains and the sociopathic gaslight monsters of that era's Penny Dreadful publications, a Spring-Heeled Jack for the 1980s.

TL: Until recently, I'd avoided your early *Swamp Thing* stories, regarding *Swamp Thing* as a fundamentally naff character with whom (I thought) no one could possibly do any worthwhile work. I was delighted, then, not only at the quality of the story-

telling, but at how intriguing the whole premise suddenly became.

It then struck me that you've often started with fairly unpromising material and done something wonderful with it (all those third-rate super-heroes in *Watchmen*, or the pulp fantasy in *Promethea*). How do you go about it? How did you breathe new life, for instance, into what might initially seem well-used ideas for ABC?

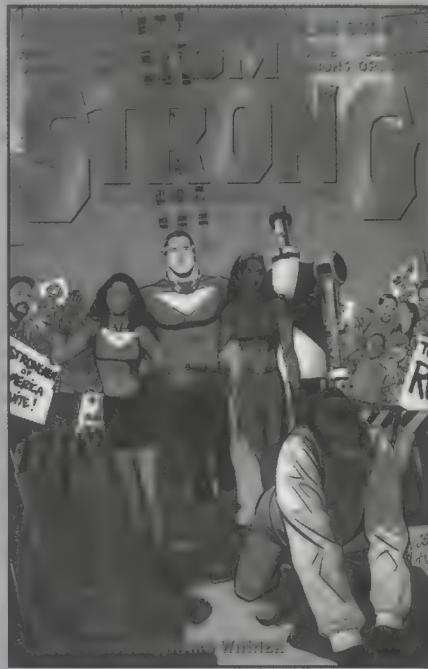
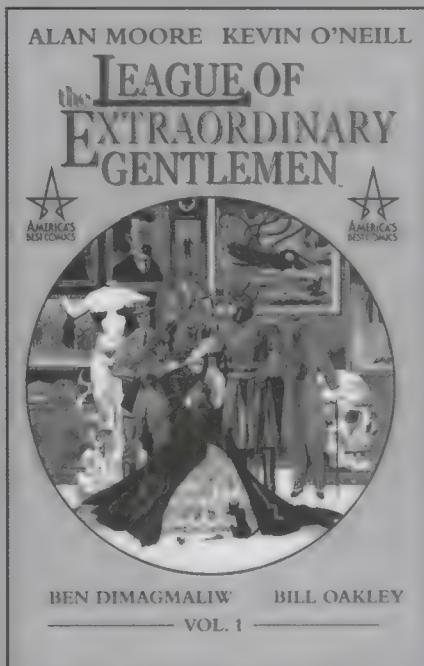
AM: When working in an industry where it is highly likely that one's earliest endeavours will involve dealing with previously-existing characters, and often boring ones at that, an almost Neo-Platonist approach to characterization seems to yield the best results. Start out with the assumption that there is an 'ideal form', an essence if you like, of any given character, with this ideal having a metaphysical existence up in some Platonic realm of being, bobbing in Idea Space.

Following from this, if characters seem flat and boring, this presumably is caused by lack of focus, lack of clarity, a clumsiness in realising the ideal, reeling it in and landing it, actualising cloudy vision in an ink and paper fish-wrap. So the premise, with a serviceable-but-routine bog-monster such as Swamp Thing is that somewhere, in the deeper reaches of imagination, must exist a perfectly developed and ideal form of the character, that's waiting only to be excavated. Start the dig secure in your conviction that you'll recognise the artefact you're looking for when you unearth it, and so will your audience. It will seem both entirely new and absolutely obvious, as if the mystery is why nobody has ever visualised the character like this before. Your re-creation will seem simultaneously to be an extreme view of the character while somehow at the same time a return to basics. Radicalism, literally an examination of the roots, is probably the term that best sums up the process.

Watchmen and the ABC line are a little different, in that these are pre-existing types rather than pre-existing characters, but the same process still obtains. With *Promethea*, for example, the initial starting point was the generic concept of fantastic heroines. A subsequent wool-gathering, an undisciplined and rambling kind of meditation, followed back the silk thread from today's insipid vampire-hunting valley girls, through Harry Peters/William Moulton's charming and perverted Wonder Woman, back to the pulp heroines, Leigh Brackett amazons and Margaret Brundage cover-girls, that had preceded her. From here, pausing to soak up any attractive or nostalgic colorations on the way, it's a short step through children's story heroines and folklore figures to the goddesses and tragic heroines of classical mythology, or to actual historic heroines such as Hypatia, gorgeous Pagan composite of Stephen Hawking, Naomi Campbell and the Dalai Lama, skinned with clamshells by a Christian mob in the fifth century. Having traced the thread back to its source, a new perspective is afforded whereby it is possible to come up with a character that will somehow embody all the elements of the fantasy-female genealogy that is described above, striking resonant chords of association with the readership while at the same time managing to seem entirely fresh and without obvious precedent.

TL: You've been very critical of the treatment of artists and writers by DC and Marvel. Has this changed with the advent of creator ownership? And what's your situation with ABC [America's Best Comics, of which Moore is the presiding genius]?

AM: The stormy passage through the early 1980s with the various walk-outs and the poisonous invective rants went some way to adjusting the behaviour of the major comic companies, though probably the benefits were enjoyed mostly by the second wave of talent that emerged during the last half



of the decade, rather than those actively involved in all the wearying quittings and tirades, which rapidly grow burdensome even when one actually rather enjoys the odd apocalyptic slanging match or ruinous self-destructive wrecking spree.

The situation's better now, albeit not entirely, and the industry still has some way to go before it's dragged kicking and screaming into the nineteenth century, but things have undoubtedly improved since Joe Siegel and Jerry Schuster sold the rights to *Superman* for thirty dollars. These days they'd at least get a couple of thousand and a cut of the plastic figure action.

Regarding ABC, the first idea was to create a line of comic books for Jim Lee's Wildstorm line. These would not have been creator owned as such, but the deal was otherwise very favourable to the creators, and Jim Lee is a very fair and gentlemanly individual who, artist himself, is known to treat artists and writers equitably. (*The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*, originally created under an entirely separate deal, is still creator owned, however.)

After contracts had been signed, artists assigned and work begun upon the ABC books, news came through that Wildstorm had been bought out by DC Comics. While theoretically it might still have been possible to have the contracts declared void at that point or to otherwise escape the obligation, artists (all of them close friends) who had been promised lucrative, rewarding work with which to feed their families, would be left in an untenable position, purely on a point of personal principle that they themselves may not have shared. Ethically, the only course that could be lived with was to bite the bullet, try to make the best of it and hope the end results would validate this frankly difficult decision, which would fortunately seem to be the case.

TL: Any comment on the way other writers have continued to use characters you

created or developed? Brian Azzarello has said he wanted to return John Constantine (*Hellblazer*) to the kind of mystery-man you originally created. Have you seen any of this work, and do you think he's succeeded?

AM: The 'Hard Times' jailhouse sequence in *Hellblazer* (which still sounds like a garish sports-coat, even after all this time), as executed by Brian Azzarello and Richard Corben, was a sterling piece of work which seemed to take the character back to his early, more ambiguous roots. Originally, John Constantine was morally ambivalent, or at least morally unreadable. Also uncertain was the occult knowledge in which he claimed to be steeped. Was he a powerful, unconventional magician of colossal magnitude or simply an inspired and self-assured con artist? Was there, indeed, any contradiction between these descriptions? Azzarello and Corben, by returning to this understated and more enigmatic version of the character, allowed the series to enjoy some genuinely spooky supernatural moments that more overblown and pyrotechnic depictions of magic had, for years, failed to achieve. Hats off to them. A quote to this effect should be appearing on the paperback collection of *Hard Times*.

In general, at the end of a long run with a continuing character, like, say, Captain Britain or Swamp Thing, there's a feeling that one's own personal version of that character is also being concluded; that subsequent versions, good or bad, will not be the same character despite looking the same and having the same name and history. This, effectively, means that there isn't any point in judging later artists' handling of a given character, since the character in their hands is to all intents and purposes a new one, and there is thus little benefit from the comparison. Dick Sprang's Batman, Neal Adams's Batman, Marshall Rogers's Batman or Frank Miller's Batman are entirely dif-

ferent characters who have a common name, a common costume (more or less), a common set of background details. Beyond that, you might as usefully compare, say, Mighty Mouse and Dracula, or the Biblical Jesus and Jesus from *South Park*.

That said, Rick Veitch's work on *Swamp Thing* and Neil Gaiman's *Miracleman* books were a real treat. Despite being different to the previous conception of the character, the ideas in that conception had been interestingly evolved, made into something that was just as fascinating, albeit separate and distinct from the original.

TL: Any comments on the collaborative process, both in comics and in music?

AM: Collaboration, unless you're an Eisner or a Spiegelmeyer, an artist-writer who has no need to collaborate, is probably the single most important talent in the comic medium. There is something in the act of creative collaboration that is perfectly analogous to sex, unless we're speaking of collaboration with Tim Perkins [collaborator on the CD *Angel Passage*], in which case nobody needs that in their minds. Otherwise, collaborative creative acts are sexual in a sense that is related to the work of Richard Dawkins, with his talk of genetic material (biologically transmitting information, through our genes, into the future by the means of children and descendants) as opposed to memetic material (propagating information by non-biologic means in the transmission of ideas by art or writing). Any two creators will have different worldviews, different skills, different creative structures that are analogues of individual genetic make-ups. The result of a collaboration will be like a child in that it will have elements obtained from both its 'parents', yet will be new and unique. With a lump in your throat you send your various offspring out into the world. Years later, you may know the heartbreak of discovering one of your babies' soiled, abused and wasted body in

a sordid backstreet bargain-bin. Another child, conversely, might go on to a spectacular career in Hollywood and buy you a fucking enormous house. You will love each one the same, even if you've been so promiscuous in your creative couplings down the years that you resemble nothing quite so much as some bleached, hard-faced sink-estate mum with eleven kids by different fathers, one of them half-Argentinian. Yeah, people can sneer, but they're not getting the child benefit.

TL: As for films – a medium that can't possibly carry the density of information which you put in your comics work – how did you feel seeing *From Hell* transferred to screen?

AM: Haven't seen it yet, to tell the truth. Films, with some notable exceptions, aren't a major area of interest. The *From Hell* PlayStation game, in contrast, is terrific. There's a tricky bit at the end of level four where you have to excise Cathy Eddowes's magic kidney in order to pick up power-points, but as a tip to your readers, if they drape the intestines over her left shoulder (not her right) they'll be able to jump over the night watchman and progress straight to level five and Miller's Court. Don't forget, you have to melt the kettle.

TL: What new projects are you working on?

AM: As far as ABC goes, coming up we have the second series of *The League of Gentlemen*, while *Tom Strong* continues as normal and *Promethea* reaches the end of the kabbalistic road-movie's ten issue run and gets back to the territory of the earlier instalments. *Top Ten's* Smax features in his own eponymous mini-series, drawn by Zander Cannon, while Gene Ha is busy on the *Top Ten Forty-Niners* graphic novel.

Terrific Tales will mostly carry on as usual, while *Tomorrow Stories* will begin a second volume as an eighty-page giant publication that will come out maybe twice a year, featuring longer instalments of the book's originally-featured characters, plus a new lead strip set in the 1950s and the 1960s, drawn by Jerry Ordway and entitled 'America's Best'.

A new creator-owned showcase title, *America's Best Comics Cascade*, will feature single issue initial runs of new characters, in collaboration with a line-up of artists who've not yet worked at ABC. The first issue will probably feature Pearl of the Deep with *Swamp Thing* and *Miracleman* collaborator John Totleben, while the second may have a supernatural/humour/horror character named Limbo, drawn by Shane Oakley.

Then there's something called *The Soul*, that's co-created with the wonderful John Coulthart and is best described as an Edwardian female supernatural investigator, treading the same territory as Hodgson's Carnacki or Blackwood's John Silence, but realised in a visually stunning psychedelic, decadent, surrealist mode made capable by

John's eerie mastery of digital art's possibilities.

As far as music goes, the next release on Steven Severin's RE: label will be *Snakes and Ladders*, as originally performed on April 10th, 1999 at the Conway Hall in Holborn's Red Lion Square as part of a day-long symposium on magic organised by both the London and the Oxford Golden Dawn Societies, amongst others. That should be out sometime this summer.

Following that, there's a lot of new songs in the works for a project we're putting together with Andrea, our lovely, talented fire-breather. All this should culminate in a new Moon & Serpent Grand Egyptian Theatre of Marvels show sometime next year. Maybe November would be good.

Beyond that, the next massive project that will see the light of day is *Lost Girls*, due sometime towards the end of this year or the start of 2003, a vast pornographic novel that is currently being finished (we like to call it 'beavering away') in the radiant and meticulous coloured pencil-strokes of top bird Melinda Gebbie. She must have used up eight or nine of those flesh-coloured pantone markers by the time we'd got to chapter twenty, two thirds of the way through. It's coming out from the in-this-instance-appropriately-named Top Shelf Publishing, and will be named and shamed in a tabloid newspaper somewhere near you.

TL: Finally, how did you come up with perhaps the greatest character in comics – Weeping Gorilla in *Promethea*? [A comic-within-a-comic, a self-pitying ape who utters suitably lachrymose catchphrases: 'What do you mean, you need more space?' 'Yes, I'm in telesales.' 'Modern life makes me feel so alone.] Now there's a guy I can really identify with...

AM: The idea probably originated in a conversation with Dave Gibbons, who was reminiscing entertainingly upon our mutual acquaintance, legendary science-fiction agent and innovative 1960s DC comics editor Julius Schwartz, specifically on Julie's sworn-by dictum that a comic book with a gorilla on the cover would always sell better than a comic book without.

Dave also pointed out that Julie had a similar observation to make about comic books with characters depicted weeping on the covers, which apparently would also sell in droves compared with tear-free cover illustrations. From this it was a short step to deducing that the most irresistible comic book creation of all time must surely, then, be a weeping gorilla. It's as simple, and as ultimately mysterious, as that.

Alan Moore's graphic novels are available in all good bookshops. For further information contact Titan Books, 144 Southward Street, London SE1 0UP (tel: 0207 6200 200) or Knockabout Comics, 10 Acklam Road, London W10 5QZ (tel: 0208 9692 945).

Steven Severin's RE: label: www.stevenseverin.com



SHADOW MAKER

David Ho

A4 pb, 192 colour pages, \$34.95 + \$5 p&p
available direct from www.davidho.com

Shadow Maker: the Digital Art of David Ho is more than just an art-book containing macabre, surreal and sometimes erotic imagery, it's a fantastic visual journey into the mind and beyond. Combining fantasy with fine arts, this book contains over a hundred unique mind-bending digital works (including the one reproduced on the cover of this issue of TTA) created over the past ten years. These are displayed in two galleries: 'mind trip' and 'post-cards from hell', each containing descriptions as to how and why the illustrations were created either personally or commercially. Between these two galleries is a fascinating chapter on technique ('method behind the madness') in which the artist takes us step by step through the creation of a particular work. Intended for more mature audiences, this lavishly produced portfolio is a definite must-have book for fantasy art lovers and art collectors everywhere.

Mike Bohatch: "Not only is *Shadow Maker* a fine layout and quality print presentation, David brings a breath of fresh air with his dark interpretations on the human perspective, fantasy and the unknown. For those who like the nightmarish surreal and with a digital twist, *Shadow Maker* is for you."



Jeffrey Ford

THE PORTRAIT OF MRS CHARBUQUE

Jeffrey Ford

William Morrow hb, 310pp, \$24.95/£16.35

review & interview by Jeff Topham



Over the last few years, Jeff Ford has emerged as one of the most consistently intriguing and inventive of contemporary fantasists. With his fifth novel, *The Portrait of Mrs Charbuque*, Ford offers a strikingly original work that refuses to be constrained by the conventions of either mainstream or genre fiction. Richly imagined and utterly compelling, *Portrait* is Ford's most ambitious and successful novel to date.

The novel is set in the New York City art world of 1893 and is narrated by the portraitist Piombo, who, despite lucrative commissions and a distinguished reputation, is unable to dodge his own suspicions that he has sacrificed art for commerce, true vision for a series of polite lies. A new commission, however, offers him the chance to put all that behind him. If successfully completed, it will offer him sufficient wealth to leave portraiture forever, but it is also coupled with a bizarre restriction: Piombo is forbidden to see the subject he must paint. As he begins the seemingly hopeless task of conjuring the image of the enigmatic Mrs Charbuque from her words alone, Ford starts to move us, slowly at first and then with increasing urgency, into a dreamlike realm suffused with both wonder and nightmare. As events grow ever stranger, the dazed Piombo finds himself increasingly unable to separate truth from fantasy, reality from delusion.

The novel is a remarkable accomplishment that takes us into some very curious imaginative territory indeed, including an ambiguous clairvoyance bestowed by a pair of identical snowflakes, a mental patient who reads the future in excrement, and an ancient parasite that causes its victims to weep blood. Even as it grows increasingly surreal, however, the narrative remains completely convincing, and even its strangest scenes are grounded by some of Ford's best-realized characters to date.

As the novel moves effortlessly between reality and fantasy, vision and hallucination, Ford is ultimately painting a magnificent portrait of a world in which the mysteries of art, love, and forgiveness are perhaps the greatest wonders of all.

JT: Piombo's (and the reader's) conception of Mrs Charbuque changes a great deal throughout the course of the novel, becoming first grotesque, then erotic, then increasingly menacing. Did you yourself have a fixed idea of what Mrs Charbuque looked like?

JF: One of the major ideas in the book for me has to do with how we form the images

we see when we are reading fiction. We can, from a mere handful of words, conjure in our minds full-blown characters with distinct faces and mannerisms and personalities. We have never seen these individuals before, they are not based on anyone we know, and yet there they are cavorting around in our minds, carrying out their lives. And all this elicited by wiggles of ink on paper. So in the book, I want the reader to experience Piombo's frustration at forming a viable picture of Mrs Charbuque from her words, but at the same time have the reader easily forming images of Piombo and Shenz and Samantha from nothing more than words. I love that dichotomy.

Only in one of the final scenes of the novel, while writing it, did I catch a fleeting glimpse of the Mrs. It came and went quickly, and I cannot bring it to mind again, but I know I saw her true visage in that instant. If anyone gets a clearer sustained view of her, I'd appreciate it if they could make a sketch and send it along. I'd love to see her again.

JT: Several critics have used the term 'dreamlike' to describe your fiction. How do you balance the idea of inspiration from the subconscious with the idea of writing as a craft?

JF: What I hope they mean by 'dreamlike' is that the unusual, or the unnatural, seems perfectly plausible within the context of the story. The thing that is most amazing about dreams is not the strange stuff that goes on, but the fact that during the dream we are utterly convinced of its reality. We believe our dreams and we run for our lives or weep or labor to hide our nakedness on stage.

Craft is a writer's ability to precisely convey a scene and its ambient emotional charge through descriptive language. How well we are able to manipulate language to convey the vision is equivalent to how convinced and engaged the reader will be by the story. For me, tapping into the subconscious is essential to writing fiction. The subconscious supplies everything one needs to write a great story. It is necessary, though, afterward to go back over the piece and make sure the language used and the craft of its application can contain the imagistic, emotional freight of that story.

JT: *Portrait*, as well as much of your other fiction, has a strain of understated but quite delicious humor running through it. Do you consider humor to be an important part of what you do?

JF: The Buddha says 'Life is suffering', yet the Buddha is always smiling. Laughter, humor, are essential ingredients if one wants to write a story that is convincing. Leaving out humor, as many writers do in an attempt to convince us of the solemnity of their pursuit, makes for boring and ultimately trivial fiction. What sets us apart from other animals is that we are the creature that laughs. We grasp irony, and irony is the engine of story. Half the time irony results in tragedy, the other half in humor.

reviews



There are times when I am writing when I laugh out loud at what the characters show me. Writing humorous scenes is difficult, because nothing kills funny like pointing at it and nudging the reader. The humor must come from the characters themselves, and one must take pains to merely relay what they say and do, nothing more. This is one of those wonderful things in writing I know I can work at for a life time and never perfect, but it is one of the most interesting aspects of fiction.

JT: In my mind, *Portrait* ultimately investigates the notion that mystery and imagination cannot be separated from the rest of life. Is this an accurate description of life as you experience it?

JF: Read any good popular science book about the nature of the universe, the latest theories of physics, and it soon becomes evident that human consciousness plays a huge part in the make-up and process of so-called reality. Imagination is, to some degree, reality. Having children has helped me to see this. They defy indoctrination, are ignorant of accepted 'truths' whose job it is to convince us that there is only one way of seeing things. As Emerson wrote, 'To a Christian, a miracle is a monster'. What he meant by this is that when you buy into a dogmatic, fundamentalist political, philosophical or religious belief system, for a miracle to occur, it must break the tradition of accepted belief. It must be an anomaly. Then he goes on to say something like, 'All you need do is look closely at Nature, everywhere around you, in a single leaf, and you will realize that miracles abound'. Of course, there will be anomalies from time to time, but don't miss the initial miracle of existence in and of itself. Think about how your body works, your mind works. Even when you're doing something as mundane as the laundry or the bills, there is something sacred and profound going on. Sometimes I see this more clearly in my fictions when I am writing them than I do in my everyday life. I try as well as I can to capture this sensibility in my writing, because I believe it is something everyone inherently will respond to at some level.

THE COLLAPSIMUM**Wil McCarthy**

Gollancz pb, 325pp, £6.99

reviewed by Paul S Jenkins



When does a novel cease to be 'hard sf' and become fantasy? The answer may have less to do with the author's intentions than with the perceptions and understanding of the reader. When the scientific theories on which a science-fiction novel is based are so obscure that their consequences seem to the reader to be entirely magical, and when the novel's setting includes royalty, courtiers, a monarchy that encompasses the entire solar system, and technological devices that act in a fashion nothing short of miraculous, the overriding impression is of traditional fantasy rather than any pretensions to hard sf.

In *The Collapsium* we are plunged into a strange future of immortals – in particular, the future of one Bruno de Towaji, a socially inept genius and the richest man alive. He's made his fortune inventing a material so useful and so improbable it could only be science fiction. 'Collapsium' is composed of microscopic black holes held together in a crystalline lattice, which is used for the transmission of matter and information throughout the solar system.

Bruno de Towaji divides his time between formulating abstruse theories about matter and energy on the one hand, and on the other assisting the Queen of Sol (his former lover) in her efforts to prevent a system-wide catastrophe that threatens to destroy the sun. It's heady stuff, full of instant speculations about the feasible and unfeasible properties of matter at the quantum scale. Eventually Bruno invents another fantastic new material, and – aided by a second version of himself – sets out in a makeshift spacecraft to save the solar system from destruction by a former colleague and rival. For a while the hard SF speculation becomes action-packed space opera.

McCarthy explains the science at length, with footnote references to an appendix containing additional stretches of narrative. Surely those sequences should be part of the story; if they're unnecessary to the story then shouldn't they have been left out altogether?

Even ignoring the appendix passages the pace of the novel seems uneven, adding to the impression that the author couldn't decide how much to include. Possibly due to the characters' immortality, the span of time is ambiguous; what appears at first to be a few days passing between certain chapters turns out to be months, if not years. And in the latter half of the book there's a suicide that doesn't ring true. The fact that it occurs

off-stage, and to a major character, further aroused my suspicions.

That's not to say it's a bad book, just unconventional. Well written, if narrowly focussed despite the expanse of its setting, *The Collapsium* has plenty of action and enough rigorous science to keep even the hardest of hard SF fans satisfied. McCarthy is clearly proud of his quantum speculations; witness the extensive glossary and technical notes (including mathematical formulae) that close off the book. But I wonder if his preoccupation with the hard SF elements hasn't been at the expense of plot and characterisation.

THE VELOCITY GOSPEL**Steve Aylett**

Gollancz pb, 131pp, £9.99

reviewed by Peter Tennant



This slim volume is billed as 'Accomplice Book 2', Accomplice being the name of the city in which the action takes place, so it's a series then and yes there's a map inside the front cover, showing that even avant-garde writers such as Aylett must sometimes conform to genre conventions. Of course the packaging could simply be artifice, an ironic commentary on said conventions, but if so then I'm not particularly amused as the end result, assuming it only goes to trilogy length and the third volume has a commensurate page count, is that the reader pays £30 for a 400pp paperback. The fact that some of the text satirises marketing and vile commercial opportunists only rubs salt in the wound.

The book's hero is Barny Juno, a Walter Mitty in reverse, who's desperately trying to pass himself off as an ordinary guy so current squeeze Magenta Blaze, who likes a man of action, will take a hike and free up Barny to be with the woman he truly loves, Chloe Low, but reality is working from a different script. Poor Barny keeps getting into scrapes. His enemy the demon Sweeney sickens Skittermite onto him, which makes for all sorts of complications. Then there's Mayor Rudloe, who invents Cyril, Public Enemy No.1, to coerce Accomplice's citizens into donating blood for his Conglomerate masters, only to have this figment of his imagination come to life, a transformation in which Barny plays an unwitting part. Add to that the Fuseheads with their Velocity Gospel, a cult who believe the way to salvation is to be fired from a cannon, or something equally silly. And let's not forget the Dangerous Reptiles Competition, which... No, on second thoughts, let's forget it.

There's not a lot I can add to Andrew Hook's comments on Book 1 in an earlier TTA. Aylett dishes up some bravissimo invention and wordplay, but also inflicts a lot of nonsense on the reader, material that is

absurdist per se. Despite the primacy suggested by the title the Fuseheads are only a sideshow in a book that's all sideshow, hung together on a tenuous narrative thread. The best I can do by way of offering comparison is to name drop something like *Monty Python and The Holy Grail*; there's the same mix of inspired lunacy on the one hand, and on the other moments when the writer tries just too hard for off the wall effects, and we end up not laughing but wondering what's on the TV. The excuse for much of the absurdity is that it's satire of the kind of nonsense talked by politicians and religious fanatics, but this is an area in which reality trumps fiction nearly every time. Aylett tries hard but what's on the page pales when set beside such real life exemplars as Paxo trying to get a straight answer out of Oberfuehrer Howard or the comet cultists topping themselves.

Yes, I enjoyed it, but not very much and with qualifications. I'm mildly intrigued to know how it all turns out but think I'll wait until Fantasy Masterworks, or someone else, decides to call it a classic and publish the whole series in one reasonably priced volume, which, given the way that classic status has been devalued by marketing hype, in the case of *Accomplice* should be about five minutes after Aylett finishes writing it.

PHAROS**Alice Thompson**

Virago pb, 151pp, price not shown

reviewed by Peter Tennant



This novel is set in the 1860s, and opens with a young woman washed up on an isolated island, the site of a lighthouse. She has no memory of who she is or how she got there. Simon, the younger of the two lighthouse keepers, a pagan whose shamanistic powers have been enhanced since he came to the island, names her Lucia, after a painted ship in a locket round the girl's neck. Cameron, the older, a rigid man of strong religious convictions, seems unsettled by the girl, but also going to unusual lengths to ensure she cannot leave. As Lucia wanders the island she sees things that the others assure her exist only in her imagination, including visions of a young coloured girl. It becomes clear that the island is haunted, and Cameron knows far more about Lucia's appearance than he is letting on.

This is a very short novel, with little in the way of real substance. The cover blurb touches on the idea of memory being linked to identity, but the story doesn't explore this in any depth. There's an attempt to build ambiguity using the trick of having the ghost's identity blurred, as popularised in films such as *Sixth Sense* and *The Others*, but at the end what we have is the usual vengeance from the past reaching out into the present schtick.

The plot doesn't hang together that well, and some of the causal connections seem horrendously coincidental, while the ending is something of an anticlimax. Characterisation throughout seems arbitrary, people acting as they do from author diktat rather than out of any consistent internal motivation. There's some vivid descriptive writing, but that's about all there is to commend it. As ghost stories go *Pharos* is pretty much a take it or leave it example of the type, contrived and unconvincing, to be read, if at all, for the language rather than the story.

PATTERN

KJ Parker

Orbit pb, 568pp, £10.99

reviewed by Simon Bestwick



This second novel in the enigmatic KJ Parker's Scavenger Trilogy has a groovy purple cover with lots of silhouetted crows. That's cool. I like crows. Which is more than can be said for Poldarn, the novel's protagonist. His relationship with the birds is complicated to say the least. As are most of his relationships, come to that.

Briefly, the plot is as follows: Poldarn has no memory of any event prior to his waking up beside a river in the aftermath of a bloody battle. His past discloses itself to him in fits and starts, dreams and flashbacks, and it appears to be an increasingly bloody one.

There's certainly a lot here that's refreshingly different from the worn-out staples of fantasy. Seekers after sodding great pitched battles, talking dragons, Dark Lords and Swords of Power etc may be disappointed. Instead, Parker weaves a slow-burning and suspenseful tale, in a voice that's unusually down-to-earth and often wryly humorous, but with a hint of something darker bubbling underneath.

I like the fusion of a world of magic and fantasy with the minutiae of everyday life, the awkwardnesses and difficulties of ordinary relationships. And I liked the few fight sequences, which show violence as the ugly, unglamorous business it is. If there are lorgneurs, there are also moments where the narrative flares into true brilliance.

BLUE DIARY

Alice Hoffman

Vintage pb, 303pp, £6.99

reviewed by Peter Tennant

Drifter Ethan Ford came to the small town of Monroe in Massachusetts and stayed to settle down with local girl Jorie. Thirteen years on they're as much in love as ever, with a son Collie and a life that seems idyllic. Ethan is a highly respected member of the local community, a small town hero thanks to his efforts on the volunteer fire

brigade and in teaching little league baseball. Then the police turn up one morning and place him under arrest. Thirteen years ago in Maryland, under another name, Ethan raped and murdered a fifteen year old girl. Monroe's people refuse to believe the man they know so well could have done such a terrible thing; it has to be a case of mistaken identity. Ethan's admission of guilt divides the town, but most come to accept his contention that he was a different man back then, and a support fund is set up to pay for lawyers. Only for those closest to Ethan it isn't that easy, and as the fallout from this random act of violence continues people's lives are turned upside down.

Ethan's son, Collie, becomes sullen and withdrawn, not wanting to know his father. Twelve year old Katya, the next door neighbour who turned Ethan in to the police, now has to live with the consequences, including the effect on Collie, whom she loves, and also the erratic behaviour of her older sister Rosarie, who has developed a crush on Ethan. Jorie's best friend Charlotte Kite, as well as being supportive, has to deal with both cancer and the protestations of love of lawyer Barney. The person most effected though is Ethan's wife, forced to deal with the fact that the man she loves is a stranger. In an effort to make sense of what has happened Jorie embarks on a trip to Maryland to learn the truth. There she meets the victim's younger brother James, a man still trapped in that terrible moment of violence, and receives from him the girl's diary. It is reading this blue backed volume that finally brings home to her what she must do.

I'll admit to being credulous of Ethan at first. Hoffman makes him too good to be true. As presented in the opening chapter he's a man without flaw, someone who never forgets anniversaries and always says the right thing, a man who, you suspect, doesn't have to use the toilet, let alone leave the lid up. Such a paragon of virtue is hard to swallow, but there's a method to Hoffman's approach; she's deliberately raising the stakes to heighten the drama and moral dilemma that follow. Ultimately what we have here is a tragedy in the original, Shakespearean sense, the tale of a hero who falls from grace not through the machinations of others but thanks to some fatal flaw in his own character.

Hoffman's writing is as effective as ever, capturing perfectly the beauty and rightness of the natural world, contrasting that with the occasional lapses into ugliness of the human animal. She spares us nothing in the way of brutality, the very ordinariness of Rachel Morris's death accentuating its horror. And at heart this is what the book is really about, that violence comes too easy, but what follows isn't easy at all. Everyone in this book is hurting; everyone has lost something, and Hoffman makes us feel their pain as if it were our own.

This is a book about what happens when your life is turned upside down, when you learn that your comfortable existence is bas-

ed on a lie. It's about the consequences of our actions and the hard choices that sometimes have to be made. Hoffman lays everything out in meticulous detail, painstakingly dissecting this small town tragedy, but offering no judgement, leaving the reader to decide. It's an intensely moving book, particularly in the pivotal Maryland section, which more eloquently and heart-rendingly than any other brings home what this is really all about.

Blue Diary is a triumph of the novelist's art, and quite possibly Hoffman's best book yet.

THE EARTHQUAKE BIRD

Susanna Jones

Picador pb, 257pp, £6.99

reviewed by Tim Lees

Lucy Fly is the kind of narrator who plays word-games in Japanese to distract herself while an earthquake rattles her apartment; and this incident, early in the book, neatly sets up her character. To outward eyes a calm and confident professional – an Englishwoman working in Japan as a translator – her life is haunted by a chaos she has tried, without success, to flee. As the story opens she is taken in for questioning by the Japanese police in connection with the murder of her former friend, an English bar hostess named Lily. But something is amiss. While on the one hand she determines to keep certain matters secret (especially where boyfriend Teiji is concerned), on the other, Lucy's responses are disconcertingly literal. She is, of course, fluent in Japanese, but allows the police to continue speaking through an interpreter. When they twig, she simply says, "I wasn't asked." Some strange game is taking place, and Lucy, for all her apparent candour, is playing by different rules from the rest of the humanity. Charming, witty and engaging, she's a confidant we warm to almost from the first. But sane? Reliable? And why, exactly, does she keep referring to herself in third person?

Her name is Fly, and she's in flight from a Yorkshire childhood few would envy. Flies, too, gather around corpses, though in this case, it's more that corpses gather around Lucy. Her close associates tend to meet sticky ends, though she's no serial killer. She's just unlucky that way – or her friends are, at least.

The notion of the jinx has been explored as an objective fact by writers such as Aldiss and M John Harrison. *The Earthquake Bird* offers a more subjective slant, with a twist at the end which leaves us unsure whether Lucy is truly in danger, or has fallen into a guilt-induced paranoia which may lead to disasters of its own.

The mind-set of a stranger in a foreign culture, alienated yet content, is beautifully conveyed, and the view of Japan encompasses both Mishima-like gothic elements and a portrait of an ordinary, workaday society going about its business (if you've ever lain

awake at night wondering about all the different types of Japanese noodle, this book is for you).

A gripping psychological thriller, this is also – and I don't want to imply any tedious metafictional hokum, because there is none – a book about words, told by a narrator fluent in two languages, who chooses words with care; but in describing her own life, she seems to have made a fatal mistranslation. It's significant that her most important relationships are almost devoid of language, based instead on sex or music; seemingly dependable indices which, nonetheless, can also betray.

Jones is a relatively young writer and this, astonishingly, is her first published work. Her elders should take note.

THE DIARY OF ELLEN RIMBAUER

Hodder & Stoughton hb, 253pp, £12.99
reviewed by Peter Tennant



Subtitled 'My Life At Rose Red', this book is a merchandising spin-off from *Rose Red*, an American TV series scripted by Stephen King. The publishers are anxious for you to know about the King connection, plastering one of those annoying little info-stickers on the front cover. Ostensibly the diary of Seattle socialite Ellen Rimbauer, kept between 1907 and 1928, and discovered by Joyce Reardon Ph.D in 1998, this is anonymously written and copyright 2001 Hyperion. Nobody claims it was actually penned by King, but the assumption is there to be made. Having read the book, I doubt it (love him or loathe him, it's unlikely King would have made such a pig's ear out of telling a story). Not having seen *Rose Red* I can't say exactly how the *Diary* ties in, whether it's a loose transcript of the series or a prequel laying down the back story.

Seattle oil magnate John Rimbauer, a *Citizen Kane* figure, builds the huge mansion Rose Red to show society what an important person he is, and marries the young and innocent Ellen. For their honeymoon the couple embark on a round the world trip, and in the course of this the battle lines are drawn in their relationship. Ellen discovers that the man to whom she's given her heart has no intention of moderating the behaviour of his bachelor days and can be cruel when challenged. Her own significance to him is little more than that of brood mare, hand picked to provide the sons Rimbauer craves. No sooner have they returned and set up house in the vast mansion on the hill than strange events start to occur. Rose Red is not like other houses; people disappear within the mansion's walls, though their plaintive voices can still be heard. As her marriage to John deteriorates Ellen becomes obsessed with Rose Red. She has the idea that the house is a living entity,

and as long as it keeps growing she can live happily there, along with her children and the maid she's come to love. But with time all of these things are stripped from her by Rose Red, until finally Ellen herself vanishes within its walls.

Speaking of the TV series, King has admitted to wanting to write a classic haunted house story, and the central concept of a house that builds itself and on whose continued growth the welfare of its inhabitants depends is both original and striking, but too many of the individual effects will be familiar from other haunted house scenarios, most obviously *The Haunting of Hill House* and *Poltergeist*.

The writing falls between two stools. There is simply too much detail for it to convince as a genuine diary, but on the other hand there is not enough narrative drive for it to work as pure fiction. And the editing choices attributed to Reardon are curious; she gives us men being killed, but removes Ellen's account of lovemaking with her maid as too indecent, though interested parties are referred to www.somethingorother for further details (apparently in Ms Reardon's world web-users are less easily shocked than book readers).

Ellen's character isn't really convincing either. She goes from bright young thing and wannabe pillar of society, to occasional devil worshipper, frequenter of mediums and lesbian lover of her coloured maid, with no real motivation for these radical changes in such a conventional person.

What we have here is not so much a story as an author randomly piling up effects. It's kitchen sink school of writing, with the urge to get in as much incident as you can in the hope readers won't notice it's mainly quantity and little quality. As a tease for the TV series it's okay, but I doubt if you need to have read *Diary* to appreciate *Rose Red*, and at the end of the day the book simply doesn't live up to its attractive packaging (an attempt has been made to create the look of a diary, with line drawings and photographs).

[The official Stephen King website recently revealed the *Diary* author as Ridley Pearson.]

ABARAT

Clive Barker

HarperCollins hb, 419pp, £17.99
reviewed by Peter Tennant



This is the first volume of a proposed four, a new fantasy series based on paintings by the author, with the film rights reputedly sold to Disney for \$8m, and it marks a return to the style of Barker's *The Thief of Always*, but with the action taking place on a much larger scale. It should appeal both to Barker's established fan base and to the Harry Potter crowd.

Candy Quackenbush is a young girl living

in Chickentown, Minnesota, where nothing ever happens, and not at all satisfied with her lot. Then she meets the thief John Mischief, who has seven separate heads sprouting from his body, and helps him escape from the homicidal Mendelson Shape. The Sea of Izabella is magically summoned and bears them away to the Abarat, an archipelago of twenty five islands, each one representing a different hour of the day, and all dominated by the forbidden Twenty Fifth Hour. Candy feels very much at home in the Abarat, almost as if she belongs, and perhaps she does (there are tantalising hints of past overlaps between the Abarat and our own world), but she becomes involved in a power struggle between opposing factions, including Christopher Carrion, the Lord of Midnight, who wants to plunge all the islands into darkness, and the scientist Rojo Pixler, whose aim is to expunge magic altogether from the Abarat and impose a sterile new order based on science and commerce.

I'll admit to not being all that taken with Barker's artwork, which accompanies the text; his draughtsmanship doesn't quite live up to the epic scope and boldness of his vision. The words though are a different matter entirely, the medium in which Barker's imagination is best expressed, and never mind all that Renaissance man stuff.

Abarat is a compelling and fast paced story, packed with incident and colour, giving us marvellously oddball and larger than life characters, set pieces pulled from the very latest sfx spectacular, and in the dazzling concept of the Abarat itself a truly novel stage on which Candy and all the others can act out whatever adventures come their way. There is of course much here that will be familiar to Barker devotees from way back; reading between the lines you pick up hints of the Sea of Quiddity, the Iad Uroboros, the Immacolata etc, all wrapped up in a more user friendly format (there's horror here, but muted, possibly with the YA audience in mind). Barker doesn't just recycle old material though, but gives us plenty of new wonders, while the different hours of the day concept is an imaginative masterstroke.

The Abarat comes not just with all the fantasy paraphernalia you'd expect, magic and dragons and swordswomen, old tropes into which the author breathes new life, but also with a complicated political and economic framework, just like the real world. Neither does Barker put things in simplistic terms of good and evil. Carrion is a monster, but Barker shows us in part how he came to be that way and makes him not entirely unsympathetic, perhaps even capable of redemption, while Pixler regards himself as a good man, but is every bit as much of a menace because of his prejudice against magic.

Barker seems to have put a cap on his occasional tendency to gigantism and after the recent disappointments of *Galilee* and *Coldheart Canyon* is back at doing what he does best, telling an exciting story the way only he can, soaring up to the heights and

down into the depths of his own imagination, then coming back to share with us all that he's seen. As a curtain raiser for a series that could well be an *Oz* for the new millennium *Abarat* is pure delight, the best that writing has to offer by way of magic, and I for one am eager to learn what happens next.

EMPIRE OF BONES

Liz Williams

Bantam Spectra pb, 336pp, price not shown

reviewed by Sarah Singleton

Communication between cultures is the theme at the heart of *Empire of Bones*, as it was in Liz Williams's first novel *The Ghost Sister*. This first novel achieved a sackful of accolades – including a nomination for the Philip K Dick Award, as well as being a New York Times Notable Book of 2001 and a Locus Recommended First Novel of 2001. Now in this second work Williams takes a new angle at the problems created when alien cultures collide – how language, the methods of communications and the make-up of a culture-created reality obstruct negotiation and understanding between different groups of intelligent beings.

In *Empire of Bones*, human life on Earth is the fruit of alien genetic seeds planted millions of years in the past. Now the aliens are returning to Earth, to bring the human race into the fold of their vast empire. The unlikely hero of the plot faces many obstacles – disadvantaged by her gender, her Untouchable caste, and a disease rendering her prematurely old, in an India of the future. But Jaya is also a Receiver – a human with the genetic ability to tap into the alien communications system, and she is a critical factor in the aliens' plans to take Earth into the empire.

The arrival of the aliens causes tumult among Earth's governments, and among the Indian people. But Jaya has to work out if a relationship with the aliens will be beneficial to humankind – and what the nature of the alien harvest might be.

Part of the action is set on the homeworld of the aliens, where the rigid caste system of future India and the subtleties of power-mongering and politics are echoed in the alien cultural system. Colonisation, the nature of sickness, the communication powers inherent in a virus, perception, and magic are also important ideas explored in the novel.

The exotic setting is colourful and convincing, and a cast of very disparate characters is effectively portrayed – particularly the alien Sirru. The alien world with its rigidly controlled and emotionally suppressed society is well drawn.

The novel is bursting with interesting ideas, with plenty of intrigue, politics and well-paced action. This reader found the plot began to flag a little in the middle – not quite sure where we were going from here – and the conclusion was extremely ambivalent. However, in art as in life, the set-up of the

scenario did not allow for any easy answers, and the reader is left with the impression the adventure has only just begun – that humans and aliens still have much to learn about each other.

Empire of Bones, like Mary Doria Russell's marvellous *The Sparrow*, are works of science fiction prepared to cast aside the easy polarities – good versus evil, alien versus human, empire versus individual – to delve to the root of conflicts caused by disparate histories, culture and methods of communication.

THE DEVIL'S LARDER

Jim Crace

Viking pb, 194pp, price not shown

reviewed by Peter Tennant

With the likes of Nigella and Jamie, Gary and Delia dominating the bestseller charts, it seems entirely appropriate that writers of fiction should turn to matters culinary for their material. Jim Crace's latest book mirrors the oblique structure of his first, *Continent*, in which a nation was brought to vivid life through a series of interlocking essays on various aspects of its culture. Here we have 64 chapters, each dealing with food, regional recipes and customs, superstition and folklore, which, in the words of the publishers, create a 'cumulative novel in sixty four parts' and a 'patchwork portrait of a community'. I prefer to regard it as a collection of themed stories, and what marvellous stories they are, tasty treats one and all, shot through with warmth and humour and passion, confectionery on which you can gorge and not feel bloated afterwards.

We learn of the infamous Curry No.3, whose ingredients are a mystery, though one fears the worst, of fashionable eatery the Air & Light restaurant, which serves to its chic clientele exactly what it promises, of a rare plant with special qualities that will preserve a marriage, and of blind pie, the serving of which is the ultimate form of revenge. Crace ranges far and wide in his efforts to broaden the menu, into regions that are as startling as they are unexpected, with the darker side of existence always an option.

Time and again we come back to the idea of decay as an essential part of the human process, a theme explored in some depth in his previous book, *Being Dead*. And like St Augustine, for whom man was conceived between faeces and urine, though not as judgemental, Crace neglects neither the sexual or cloacal items on his bill of fare. The biggest and tastiest vegetables are those grown in human shit and watered with piss. The act of eating becomes not just a substitute for sex, but also an adjunct to the most intimate of acts, with tuberous plants rising out of the ground like rearing phalli and the most tender of fruits stewing in their own succulent juices.

Novel or not, who cares? A brilliant and

different book from a writer who, like the best chef in the swankiest restaurant in town, always gives his customers value and yet leaves them wanting more. Forget Nigella, all that domestic goddess crapola, with the charged looks and constant innuendo. The woman's just a tease, but Crace is the real deal. He may not promise as much, but he delivers far more. Get down to the nearest bookshop and cut yourself a generous slice of the action.

collections

EVERYTHING'S EVENTUAL

Stephen King

Hodder & Stoughton hb, 416pp, £17.99

reviewed by Mike O'Driscoll



Given all that has happened to King in the nine years between the publication of his last collection of stories – *Nightmares and Dreamscapes* – and this latest slab of short fiction, the title, *Everything's Eventual*, is both appropriate and rich in irony. At last, a couple of decent movie adaptations of his work following years of dross – *The Shawshank Redemption* and *The Green Mile* were as good as if not better than earlier films like *The Dead Zone*, *The Shining*, *Carrie* and *Stand By Me*; the experiments with new and old forms of delivering his fiction to his readers – the e-novellas 'The Plant' and 'Riding the Bullet', and *The Green Mile* first published in serial form; finally being taken seriously by the mainstream literary establishment – reviews and profiles in the broadsheets, which discussed the merits of King the writer rather than King the publishing phenomenon, not to mention an *Omnibus* profile on BBC; the autobiographical nature of parts of *Hearts in Atlantis*; the teaming up for unfinished business with Peter Straub, and, oh yes, that brush with death while out walking on Route 5 in rural Maine in June 1999. It may be that King's maturity as a writer and his increasing acceptance by literary critics are unconnected to this last event, but the impression conveyed by the best of the stories collected here is one of a writer unafraid to risk alienating his core audience, and, more crucially, that of a man coming to terms with mortality. Everything, these stories affirm, is indeed eventual.

In his introduction, King questions his readers' interest in the short story form, suggesting that they ask themselves how many other collections make the bestsellers list in any given year. He recognises the gulf that exists – in sales terms – between his own excursions into the field and that of the majority of collections and anthologies, arguing that the short story is getting pretty close 'to the lip of the drop into extinction's pit'. While readers of – and contributors to

– TTA might argue against such a gloomy outlook, the truth is that there simply aren't enough readers interested in the form to sustain short story collections, anthologies and magazines on a commercially viable basis. And before anyone attempts to bite my head off, just scan the bestsellers list of your choice. Of the twenty books listed in The Observer's Top Ten hardback and paperback lists for 14 April last, only one was a collection of short stories.

And that, appropriately, was *Everything's Eventual*.

The collection brings together fourteen stories from the last seven years, the best of them among the finest pieces of fiction King has written, while even the 'weaker' tales show an economy of description, and a mastery of pacing, tension and characterisation that is an object lesson in short story writing. As well as bringing a fresh insight into old preoccupations, he moves in new directions. There are stories of public and private failure, haunted hotel rooms, *déjà vu* and the realisation of the closeness of death, as well as a couple of out and out horror tales where King does what he has always done so effortlessly – scare the pants off his readers.

Only one story – unfortunately the longest – seems out of place, and that is 'The Little Sisters of Eluria'. It's a precursor to the *Dark Tower* fantasy series, and tells of an encounter between hero Roland Deschain and a coven of witches masquerading as a community of healers. King claims that foreknowledge of the series isn't necessary to enjoy the story. Well, maybe not, but in striving for an ornate, almost poetic prose style – the kind of writing Lucius Shepard is so good at, particularly in the collections *The Jaguar Hunter* and *The Ends of the Earth* – he over-elaborates and ends up swamping the narrative in the kind of cod-fantasy tropes which even National Lampoon might have been embarrassed to use in their Tolkein parody *Bored of the Rings*. Shorn of its fey aspirations and with less time devoted to description of its locale – a strange hybrid of Tombstone and Shire – this would have worked as a rather gruesome cautionary tale. But at sixty two pages it over-stays its welcome.

Far better is the title story, in which the protagonist – a loser with unrealised psycho-kinetic abilities – is recruited by a semi-legitimate underground organisation which aims to fight back against the forces of reaction and anti-democracy. Or so he is led to assume. The truth is much more sinister, as Dink's powers are refined and directed towards the long-range extermination of what – both in the States and increasingly here in the UK – are contemptuously termed 'liberals'. What '*Everything's Eventual*' suggests is that it's the refusal to do anything so uncool as to engage with political and social questions, that allows the more extreme forces of conservatism to cast liberals as being close kin to Lucifer. Dink's

willingness to cede self-responsibility to Transcorp and the mysterious Mr Sharpton in return for a life free of stressful decision-making and choice, allows him to blithely kill on the assumption that his victims are 'bad people'. When Dink learns that his victims include such evil figures as a pro-choice journalist who questions military spending, a clinical biologist working in AIDS research and a retired general cum-pacifist politician, an awareness of his own moral turpitude come as a wake-up call delivered far too late. Dink is not a bad guy as such, but in choosing to bury his head in the sand, he – and by implication, all of those who prefer to have their moral and political opinions dictated to them rather than go to all that effort of thinking things through for themselves – is complicit in Sharpton's evil.

'In the Deathroom' also confronts political extremism, this time in a more direct manner. Fletcher is an American journalist covering political unrest in some unnamed South American state. Perceived as being critical of the governing regime and supportive of guerrilla forces, he is detained and interrogated by a bunch of unsavoury characters who come pretty close to seedy Latin-American stereotypes. What saves the story is not so much King's attempt at Kafka-lite, as the fact that he dares to confront such issues at all, and that in doing so, he manages to avoid didacticism and delivers a gripping story with a righteous ending. Although the story keeps the political issues in the background, it's interesting to see a major genre writer – and specifically a horror writer – turning his attention to the real horrors of political extremism. 'Autopsy Room Four' seems like a variation on the theme of 'In the Deathroom', except that here the protagonist really does want to talk and his fate rests on his inability to attract rather than deflect the attentions of his would-be interrogators. Paralysed and displaying all the signs of death – due to a snakebite – Howard Cottrell has to rely on an involuntary response to the ministrations of a female doctor to save himself from dissection.

Three stories look at marriage in varying stages of disintegration, from the growing sense of dissatisfaction and a realisation that though there should be, there really is nothing more, felt by the lonely salesman of 'All That You Love Will Be Carried Away' to the mutual loathing and hostility displayed by the couple meeting with their lawyers to discuss the terms of their divorce in the bizarre 'Lunch at the Gotham Cafe'.

The first of these follows what may be the final days of a salesman contemplating suicide as he travels around the bleak mid-west. Home represents an ideal that remains unfulfilled – despite the presence of a wife and child, while the graffiti he sees in the restrooms of motel, diners and service stations, and copies into a notebook, seem to offer an ironic comment on the futility of

his life. The story is open-ended, with the suggestion that the protagonist will return home to his family being undermined by the cruel desperation and movement towards death embedded in the graffiti messages.

The latter story depicts a marriage in which the spell of love – or, more accurately, of lust – blinds the protagonist to the destructive nature of the relationship. Meeting with his soon-to-be ex-wife and her lawyer for lunch, the blackly comic story mutates into something surreal and far nastier. It must be one of the wildest and weirdest stories King has ever done.

In between these two there is the beautifully realised 'L.T.'s Theory of Pets', in which the central character – L.T. – spins the tale of how his wife walked out on him and how that prompted him to formulate his theory of pets. The yarn is spun usually to a bunch of buddies over a beer or at lunch-break, and though played for laughs, his story displays a real depth of feeling. It's strong enough – in terms of humour and characterisation – to stand on its own merits, but King uses a framing narrative to add a whole new layer of meaning to the central tale. This framing narrator neither ridicules nor passes judgement on L.T.'s story. Rather he uncovers the real sadness and desperation in it and points towards the truth it elides. And even in doing so, he contradicts himself and reveals something of his own humanity by seeming to concur with the yearning hope held out by L.T. that his runaway wife might still be alive.

'The Man in the Black Suit' revisits the emotional terrain of 'The Body' and more recently, 'Low Men in Yellow Coats'. Childhood perceptions are filtered through the perspective of age – but rather than providing solace, distance and maturity cast a truer, more disturbing light on what might have been dismissed as a child's imaginings. The ending in particular gives the lie to notions of a stoical acceptance of death being somehow inherent in old age. The Devil can instil as much fear in an old man as in a nine year old boy.

In 'The Road Virus Heads North', one work of art – a painting of the same title as the story – might be seen as the catalyst for a writer's doubts about the worth of his own artistic output. The painting seems to embody Richard Kinnell's fears that the chickens are coming home to roost, which, as the story progresses, would seem to be the case. But Kinnell isn't ashamed of his decision to write horror, nor does he aspire to the pretensions of 'literary' writing, as do the protagonists of *Misery* or *The Dark Half*. The murderous Road Virus who pursues Kinnell is motivated neither by revenge nor hatred. Like a virus he kills simply because that's what he was meant to do. Whatever human characteristics Kinnell invests in the killer come from the same source that has made him such a success in his chosen field – his imagination.

'Lucky Quarter' is a short but charming tale of wish fulfilment, told with a real empathy for its central character, Darlene, an underpaid hotel maid and single mother. It manages to say more in its few pages about the dreams and aspirations of what we now euphemistically call the 'socially excluded' than any number government white papers or research studies.

'The Death of Jack Hamilton' is narrated by a friend and accomplice of John Dillinger and focuses on the long drawn out death of Hamilton, another member of the gang. The story evokes memories of Bonnie and Clyde and other dust-bowl gangsters and outlaws of the 1930s – or at least memories of these people as they have been depicted in films and stories – and once again King's writing has an emotional intensity that keeps the story and its word-pictures ticking over in the mind long after it has been read.

'1408' is the haunted hotel room story and it features another writer, this time a cynical skeptic who's frittered away his talent on such works as *Ten Nights in Ten Haunted Houses* and *Ten Nights in Ten Haunted Graveyards*. Mike Enslin has checked into New York's Hotel Dolphin to spend a night in its allegedly haunted room 1408, as research for his next book on haunted hotels. Enslin doesn't believe in ghosts, but neither does he debunk these stories of hauntings. Instead, he writes amusingly of his own non-supernatural adventures at these locales, which leaves him totally unprepared for the experience of room 1408. It's a clever, punchy ghost story that touches on the kind of relationship between space and memory, locale and history, presence and non-presence, explored at much greater length in Danielewski's *House of Leaves*.

I don't know how many people actually read 'Riding the Bullet' when it first appeared as an e-novella (I think a few hundred thousand copies were downloaded), but I suspect its readers were greatly outnumbered by those who heard about or contributed to all the fuss surrounding its publication in that format. Hopefully, in the context of this collection, the story can be judged on its own merits, as a superbly crafted and moving tale of a young college student's relationship with his mother. Though King utilises another familiar horror trope – the innocent hitchhiker who gets a ride with a dead man – he uses it to give voice to a common fear, one that we will all have to confront eventually, the death of a parent.

And finally, there's that tale of *déjà vu*, which is, you know, 'That Feeling, You Can Only Say What It Is in French'. This, along with 'L.T.'s Theory of Pets' is the one that had the greatest resonance for me, not least because of my own unease about flying. As a couple journey by plane and road towards a Florida holiday home for their second honeymoon, memories collide with premonitions to the extent that the boundaries between past, present and future become blurred. There's an air of fatalism and

inevitability about the story, which, rather than detracting from its denouement, creates a powerful counter force which seeks to disrupt the conclusion you know is coming. But not only does it come, it keeps coming, over and over again. The impossibility of escaping the nightmare makes this a compelling and terrifying vision of Hell. What the heroine's grandmother didn't say when she once warned her, "All the hard days are coming," was that once they start, they never stop.

Everything's Eventual shows King at the top of his form, a writer who has stretched the contours of his chosen genre almost out of shape. Whether you call him a horror writer, a fantasist, a fabulist or some other awkward descriptive term is irrelevant. I would guess King sees himself simply as a writer (his last work of non-fiction was called *On Writing* rather than *On Writing Horror*). Like Bradbury and Ellison, and many other chroniclers of America over the last fifty years, I suspect that's more than enough.

THE GREAT ESCAPE

Ian Watson

Golden Gryphon Press hb, 283pp, £23.95

reviewed by Peter Tennant



If Science Fiction truly is a literature of ideas, then this collection of nineteen stories, beautifully packaged and with a gorgeous wraparound cover by Ron Walotsky, and stuffed with enough big ideas to boggle the broadest of minds, should confirm Ian Watson's status as one of the genre's most accomplished performers.

The title story is set in a grotesquely realised vision of Hell, with the demons planning to escape in a way that confounds the expectations of their angelic overseers, a story that for sheer audacity is up there with the best of them.

In 'When Thought-Mail Failed', a wry appreciation of human nature and determinism, society tries to rebuild after the loss of the telepathy on which it depended, falling into the hands of a tin-pot dictator. 'Caucus Winter', which could easily have been expanded to novel length, has a right wing militia gaining control of a quantum computer and America's missiles, a tautly written techno-thriller with staggering implications. In 'A Day Without Dad' Watson develops the fascinating idea of a future where the elderly can be stored inside the minds of their loved ones, while a cosmic mystery must be unravelled in 'Ferryman', with the Solar System besieged by the spacefaring coffins of an alien race.

'Three-Legged Dog' has a woman murdered by her computer game designer husband and returning as a very real ghost in the machine, a story that uses science to

peel back layers of emotion and psychological acuity. 'The Boy who Lost an Hour, the Girl who Lost her Life' has a shockingly simple premise, with a child who misunderstands when the clocks are put back an hour, leading into one of the most powerful endings in the collection, and in the intriguing 'Tulips from Amsterdam' a man becomes the victim of an urban legend chillingly made flesh and blood.

Humour too is an important weapon in Watson's armoury, as with 'The Shape of Murder', a witty and ingenious Christie pastiche in which Hercules Poirot is summoned to solve a murder aboard a spacecraft, or 'What Actually Happened in Docklands', a delightful, tongue-in-cheek send-up which has SF writers at a fan convention saving the world from other dimensional invaders, with half the fun being in guessing exactly who Watson has in mind for the various characters.

Not all of the stories work as well, such as 'Early in the Evening', which presents the concept of all of history, from Stone Age to Space Age, as a Möbius strip endlessly replayed in its entirety over the course of a single day, but having launched the big concept Watson doesn't do enough to make it credible or interesting from a narrative viewpoint, or 'The Amber Room', a contrived and fanciful account of a man's hunt for fabled treasure, while in the initially promising but ultimately risible 'Such Dedication' an astronaut is brainwashed into thinking he's Jesus's immortal brother.

At times Watson seems so taken with an idea that he lets it run away with him, when he should be paying more attention to the story.

Such shortcomings are few and far between though, and should not be allowed to detract from an all round excellent collection, the best of the three that I've seen from Ian Watson's pen.

SUBMERGED

AL Barker

Virago hb, 239pp, £16.99

reviewed by Peter Tennant



This volume contains seven stories by the little known but highly respected Barker, each one a polished gem, laced with wry humour and shot through with insight, tales in which things are never quite what they seem and we judge too quickly at our peril.

In 'Submerged' a young boy is witness to a woman's death by drowning, but keeps silent and allows a man to be charged with her murder for reasons of his own. An elderly woman on her own at Christmas receives an unexpected and wholly unwelcome visitor in 'Someone at the Door', while 'Men, Those Fabulous Creatures' has a do-gooder getting the wrong end of the stick entirely.

on a visit to an old people's home. In 'The Iconoclasts' a young boy's adulation for his older friend leads him into trouble, and the historical 'Jane Dore - Dear Childe' has a lustful preacher accusing the object of his desires of witchcraft. 'A Chapter in the Life of Henry Subito' gleefully recounts the adventures of a junior conman in a tone reminiscent of Saki.

Set during WWII, at 117 pages 'Novelette' is the longest and also the best story in the collection. It tells of a young serviceman billeted with a family in the countryside while he recovers from his wounds, and wreaking emotional havoc in the heart of the older woman who cares for him. Barker doesn't set a foot wrong here, capturing perfectly the confused and contradictory feelings of the various characters, how and why they act as they do, the loss of innocence and attendant guilt, the clash between dreams and that old spoiler reality.

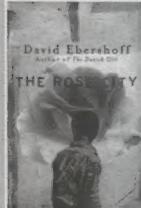
These stories are beautifully written, the richness of the prose bringing their world to vibrant life, and they contain some compelling evocations of the human animal in his all too often tawdry splendour, unlocking the heart and revealing all its secret hopes and fears, yet still retaining a sense of the ineffable. Recommended to those who want something that's a little bit off the beaten track.

THE ROSE CITY

David Ebershoff

Phoenix pb, 220pb, £6.99

reviewed by Peter Tennant



Set in Boston and California, this collection of seven stories takes a penetrating look at the lives of gay men. The eponymous hero of 'Chuck Paa' makes his living by caring for men dying of AIDS, second hand compassion a substitute for his own emotional vacuity.

In 'The Dress' a ten year old boy and his father are estranged by the former's discovery of the joys of dressing up in women's clothing, while a hustler on the make has his eyes opened by a woman in peril when coerced into helping her search for 'The Charm Bracelet'. 'Living Together' has two gay men setting up as flatmates, a situation fraught with complications and uncertainty.

In 'Regime' a young boy becomes obsessed with dieting in the hope of making himself more attractive to his peers. 'The Rose City' is the story of Roland Dott, forever chasing after the perfect man, never realising how time is passing him by or that he has become the victim of his own sad delusions.

Finally there's the best of the bunch, the poignant and painful 'Trespass', in which a young boy, wishing to explore his own sexuality, tries to make contact with the life of

a gay man by breaking into his house while he's away, and the tragic consequences of that act.

These are moving stories, heartfelt and touching, full of surprises and minutely detailed emotions, written from a gay perspective certainly, but with a universality regarding the lies we tell to ourselves and each other, the need to be wanted that consumes us all, and the fear of being found out for who we really are.

Ebershoff's work is given the stamp of emotional authenticity by his fine eye for subtle nuances of character, not only dialogue but the often far more important things

that go unsaid. None of the people he writes about are happy with their lives, and in that sense it made me think of a white collar version of *Last Exit to Brooklyn*. The overwhelming impression left in the mind is that, 35 years on from Selby's groundbreaking work, the gay man who is at peace with himself and content with his life remains an unattainable goal, like the exemplar in the story 'Trespass', an iconic figure who is spoken of but never actually seen. Of course one should be wary of granting too much significance to such a subtext, as content people, gay or otherwise, are seldom the concern of fiction writers.

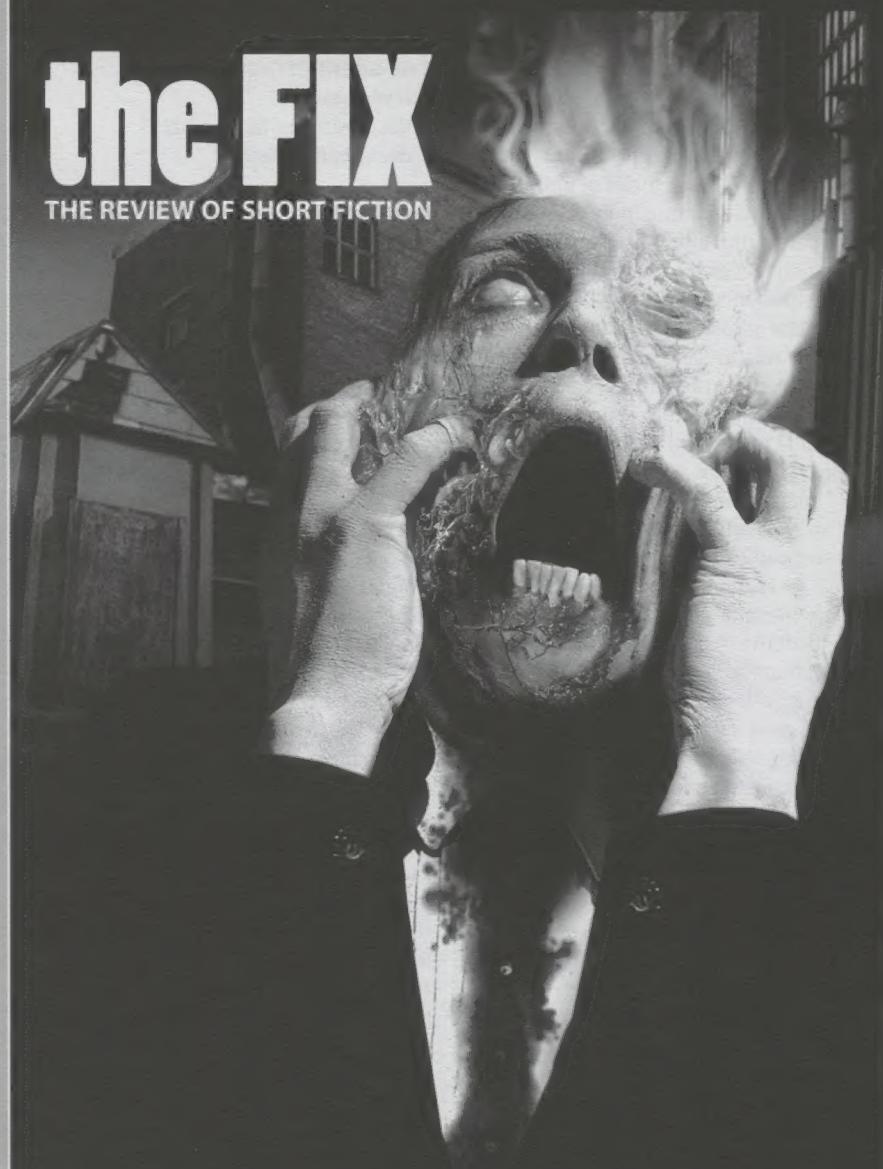
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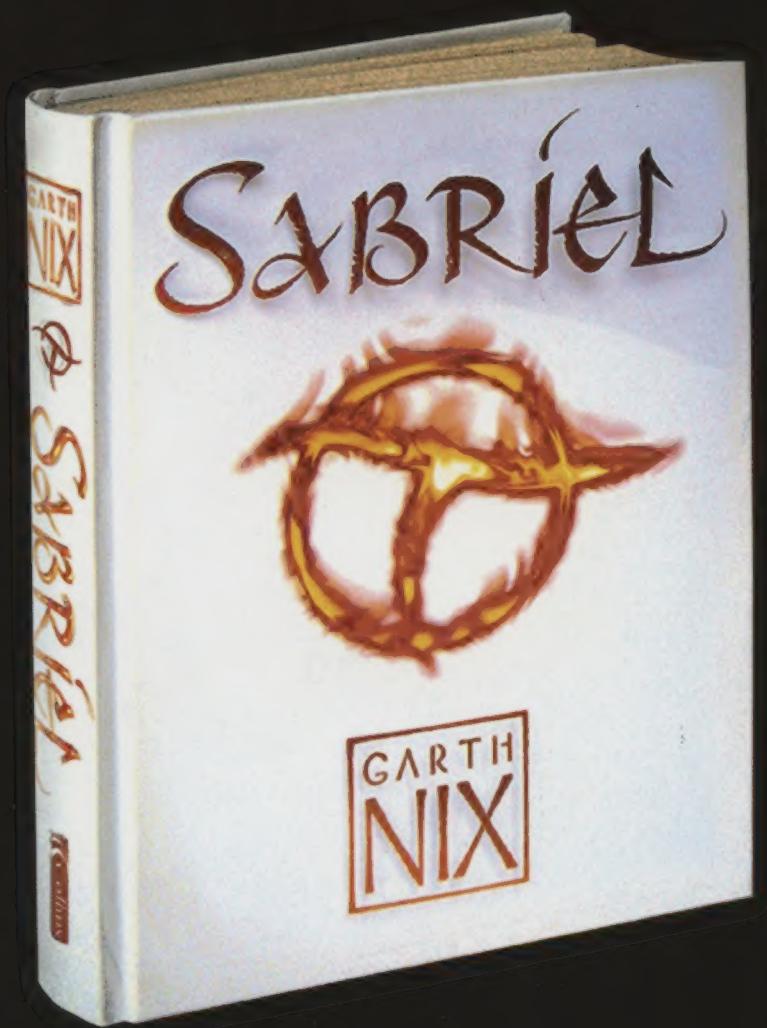
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